HELP WANTED

A NEW ELM STREET NOVEL

FREDDY KRUEGER'S™ TALES OF TERROR

BASED ON THE CHARACTERS CREATED BY WES CRAVEN

DAVID BERGANTINO

TOR®
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Annotation

HELP WANTED.
NO EXPERIENCE REQUIRED.

It's been a year Laura Walcutt would just as soon forget — especially since she broke up with her boyfriend and lost her lifeguard job at the Springwood municipal pool… Great. No boyfriend. And now no job. Luckily, Laura bumps into a classmate who works at the local hospital, and he thinks he can arrange an interview for Laura. The boy is new in town, and Laura likes his easy smile and dark eyes. Best of all, he isn't anything like her ex-boyfriend Chester. He seems to like her, too. Laura realizes that it may not be such a bad summer after all.

But when a killer goes on a bloody rampage, Laura must confront her worst fears and suspicions about the new boy in town. Is he Laura's dream come true? Or is he her worst nightmare?

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David Bergantino
Freddy Krueger's Tales of Terror #5: Help Wanted

For Marilyn Shostek and Kurt Keck

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HELP
WANTED

Prologue

So you've come about the job, have you? Excellent! Freddy's always looking to bring some new blood into the boiler room. How did you hear about the position? Did you spot a newspaper ad — or did you see the writing on the wall? Heh heh heh…

I think you'd find this job a killer. In fact, that's exactly what I'm looking for: a killer. Someone who likes to work with his or her hands — and maybe a chain saw or a machete, as well. You should already have relevant experience, but on-the-job training is available for those who show unusual promise. The squeamish need not apply.

Now, you will be dealing with a lot of dead meat, but you won't be flipping burgers and you won't have to wear a uniform, though I recommend wearing clothes you don't mind getting a bit… soiled. Heh heh heh… A word of warning, though: Competition within the workplace can be fierce. There tends to be a lot of back stabbing. The kind done with real knives. Sharp ones.

So if you're still interested, I would be happy to take your application. It must be filled out completely. In blood, of course. Then come the interviews, a long — sometimes deadly — but necessary process. And if you make the cut, I'll hand you the keys to the company carnage and welcome you aboard. It will be the kind of job offer you simply can't refuse.

In the meantime, think of the following frightening fable as a training manual of sorts — an eye-opening introduction to the bright red… oops… I mean, the bright and gleaming future that awaits you.

Chapter 1

Laura Walcutt hated hospitals and all the deadly viruses that inhabited them. Reluctantly she approached Springwood General's administrative offices. She kept her breath shallow, wishing that this would help to protect her, but fearing that it would actually make her pass out.

The front desk was cluttered, but unoccupied. No one was in the immediate front area. Behind the desk was a smoked-glass door, across which danced indistinct shadows from within the office beyond. Laura's hand paused above a bell labeled "Ring for Help." She didn't really want help. She didn't really want to be here. And most of all, she didn't want to work here.

But she needed a job so badly.

That thought overpowered her temporary paralysis and she tapped the bell. The shadows in the administrative office quickly reshaped themselves into a recognizable human silhouette. Laura braced herself. In this oppressive environment she expected the worst. This was sure to be a depressing ordeal. She was used to working out in the sun and air, with kids her age, not in some way station to a mausoleum. Laura suddenly felt the urge to duck down, so she would be hidden behind the desk. Whoever looked would find the desk empty, figure the ring of the bell had been imagined, and return to work so Laura could escape. But then the door opened. Instead of the miserable, wizened creature she had expected, a cute boy, no older than Laura, emerged.

"Hi there!" He smiled broadly, leaning forward on the desk in a casual, almost jaunty manner. "I'm Buck. What can I do for you?"

The contrast between this boy and Laura's expectations was so great that at first, she couldn't even respond. For a long moment, Laura even forgot she was in a hospital. As Buck's smile widened with amusement, she realized she was gaping at him.

"Oh, sorry," she blurted out, certain she was blushing. But her eyes were still locked with his, and she was rendered speechless as she drank in his features: attractive, with a thick mop of jet black hair and an easy smile. He looked thin enough to be beaten by the Scarecrow at arm wrestling, but he did not hold himself like a ninety-pound weakling.

She closed her eyes tightly and shook her head. You're inquiring about a job, Laura reminded herself, not trying to make a love connection. Besides, you're on the rebound, remember. With that sobering thought, Laura's mind cleared and she was able to open her eyes again, her priorities straight and her goals in plain sight.

"Hi," she said in the confident, you-want-to-give-me-a-job-don't-you? voice she had rehearsed for hours. "I'm Laura Walcutt. I'm responding to the Help Wanted ad in yesterday's paper." As soon as Laura said the words "Help Wanted," Buck winced.

"I'm sorry, Laura Walcutt, but the position's been filled." His tone of voice was a parody of hers, but he was not trying to be unkind. And when Laura crumpled slightly at the disappointing news, his expression turned sincerely apologetic. Then suddenly he seemed to recognize her and asked, "Aren't you a lifeguard down at the pool?"

"I was," Laura said, aware that her bitterness was audible. "But the BPR, Bureau of Parks and Recreations, cut the budget, and I got laid off."

Buck shook his head sympathetically. "That sucks."

"You don't know the half of it," Laura agreed. "It was a complicated, ugly mess. And now I have to run all over town looking for work. The only other place that's got a part-time job advertised is a store at the mall, and I'll never get that."

"That's not a very positive attitude," Buck pointed out.

"One of the assistant managers is a girl I know, and we don't get along, to put it mildly."

"Ah."

"I could handle working with her if I got hired," Laura explained. "But I think she's involved in the hiring process, so I'm sunk."

"I see." Buck nodded seriously. "You seem awfully anxious to land a job. You need to save up for school or something?"

"Well…" Laura's voice trailed off. She was not sure of what to say. Whether he knew it or not, that was a very personal question. Buck seemed to pick up on her hesitation. He withdrew the question.

"Sorry. None of my business." There was an awkward pause. Then Buck thrust out a hand toward Laura; "I'm Buck Lochner, by the way." Laura took his hand and they shook.

"Well, Buck, job or not, it's good to meet you."

"Glad you think so," he said sincerely. "I just moved into town, to a house on Elm Street."

"Not near the old Thompson house, I hope." She held her breath. Anywhere within ten blocks of that place would be too close for comfort for her.

Buck laughed. "You mean the local haunted house? It's down the street a ways."

"Well, be careful," Laura warned.

"Too late," he declared soberly. "It got me already."

"What do you mean?" Laura asked, fearful that he wasn't taking the danger seriously.

"Went exploring last week, after I heard about the place. Thought I was watching where I was stepping, but my foot went through a rotted floorboard and wham! I came this close" — Buck held up a thumb and forefinger about three inches apart — "to bashing my head in. Twisted my ankle pretty bad."

Laura's eyes went wide. "You got off lucky. That place is cursed." She looked at the twinkle in Buck's eye.

"I'm all right," Buck said, apparently wanting to change the subject. Laura decided to drop it. Buck was new in town. He'd learn soon enough. Anyone who moved to Springwood learned eventually. That is, if they lived. "So, have you met anyone here yet?" she asked.

"Not really. I came after school ended. You're really the first person my age I've met."

"You'll be a senior this fall?" Laura asked.

Buck nodded. "Yeah. It's going to be weird being a senior and not knowing anyone."

"Well, you know me," she pointed out. "And I can introduce you to tons of other kids."

"That'd be great!" Buck said excitedly. Then a sly look stole over his face. "But only if they're as cool as you."

Laura was blushing once more, but still managed to smile and say, "I don't know if *that* is possible, but my friends come pretty close. In fact, my best friend, Doug, is having a party tonight. You could come if you want."

"Cool!" Buck was thrilled. But then he stopped short. "This Doug guy, is he your boyfriend?"

Normally Laura would have laughed off the question. But because of recent events, she couldn't help but sigh with frustration. "No. Doug and I are just old, best friends. I am currently — and happily — unattached,"

Buck smiled. "Then can I go with you?" he asked, a little nervously. "I have a car and I could pick you up."

It sounded like a fine idea to Laura. "My younger sister might need to come with us. Would that be all right?"

Buck didn't blink an eye. "Of course. The more the merrier. What's your sister's name?"

"Shelby. She's really my best friend. Closer than Doug, even." A whole series of images flashed through Laura's mind, but she couldn't possibly talk about it. She hardly knew Buck. Instead she simply explained, "We've been through a lot together." The statement seemed to make Buck wonder, but he let it pass. "Anyway, she's fourteen, but not like a baby or anything. We're a lot alike, but she's more of a bookworm. I'm trying to get her to be more social, so I've been inviting her out with me this summer."

"Neat! I wish I'd had a big brother who'd done that for me. Heck, I wish I had any sibling at all."

"Only child?" Laura asked.

"Yep. Actually, it's just me and my dad." Resignation sounded in his voice, and a distant melancholy.

"I know how it is," Laura said sympathetically. "It's just me and Shelby and our mom. Been that way for a long time."

Buck was only slightly comforted. "Well, at least you have your sister," he muttered. Then, realizing how he sounded, he forced a smile back onto his face. "Cue the violins. Yikes!" He clapped his hands together, then rubbed them hard against each other. "Listen, I gotta get back to work. But I'm off at six. Can I call you after that?"

"That would be great." She took a scrap of paper from her purse and scribbled on it. "Here's my number." She smiled and felt herself blush yet again.

"Talk to you," Buck said, then he watched as Laura turned and started toward the elevators.

Laura felt an unusual sense of calm come over her. Meeting a boy like Buck seemed to lift her out of her usual sea of fears. It was a feeling she liked very much. And after a day like today had been, which came after a

week like last week had been, it was just the kind of feeling she needed. And deserved.

Glancing over her shoulder, Laura saw that Buck was still watching her. He immediately started moving off, pretending he had not been caught staring. Laura smiled and waved. Buck responded with an embarrassed wave of his own.

* * *

Back in the administrative office, Buck stood next to the desk as if rooted to the floor. He stared, trancelike, at the spot where Laura had stood. The rest of the day would be unbearable now. Though he had tried to conceal his feelings, the fact was, he had fallen utterly in love with Laura the first moment he had laid eyes on her. It had.pained him more than she would ever know when he had told her there was no job available for her. There was nothing he could possibly want more than to have her as a co-worker.

Buck's eyes narrowed as the wheels of his mind began to turn.

Chapter 2

Laura returned home disappointed. She was no closer to landing a job than she had been before she'd left that morning. Of course, she had found Buck. That might even seem more important than a job, if she weren't too exhausted to think about it.

Shelby, sitting on her bed poring over her stamp collection, saw the look in her sister's eyes as soon as Laura walked in.

"No luck, huh?" Shelby's expression was all sympathy and concern. Though younger, Shelby was the more levelheaded of the two, and often assumed the role of the «older» sister. Laura was so comfortable with this arrangement, she barely noticed it anymore.

Flopping down on Shelby's bed, Laura sighed. "Everywhere I go, they say they've already hired their summer help. At this rate, I won't get a job until it's time for school to start again."

"Maybe you shouldn't pressure yourself," Shelby said casually. "Maybe you should just enjoy the summer."

Laura looked at her sister, shocked at such a suggestion. "What do you mean? Not work? I've got to do my part around here. I'm old enough for a job, so I should help out."

"But, Laura," Shelby said gently, "Mom's been working steadily for a year now. We're pretty much out of the woods. I bet Mom would even like to see you take it easy. She's been saying she'll give you an allowance soon, hasn't she?"

"I don't know," Laura said, her voice rising in an angry pitch. "I can't just sponge off of Mom like that, even if she wanted me to."

"Okay," Shelby said, backing off quickly. "It was just a suggestion."

Laura sighed deeply, stretched back on the bed, and stared at the ceiling. Shelby turned back to her stamps, and an awkward silence enveloped the room.

Against the ceiling, Laura saw a movie she had watched dozens of times before. It was entitled *I Was on Top of the World, until the Bottom Fell Out.* This familiar tale began with the full Walcutt cast: Dad, Mom, nine-year-old Laura, and seven-year-old Shelby. In it, the perfect family life was suddenly and irrevocably shattered when the villainous dad ran off with his

buxom secretary. The mom, a housewife totally devoted to her children, was suddenly looking at a new life with no income, no job, and no marketable skills. Several difficult years followed. The mom eventually got a low-paying data-entry position, but soon was able to send herself to college. Meanwhile, the girls learned to take care of themselves, and each other. And they learned the importance of an education. Their mother taught them that, above all, they should never allow themselves to rely upon another person for their livelihood.

The mom graduated from school and started a travel agency. The money she earned ultimately rivaled what the dad had made. Things became more comfortable. Shelby quit her paper route.

As her mind-movie flickered to its conclusion, Laura was left wondering. Was a summer job really that important, now that Mom could easily support them? Truth was, Laura wasn't sure what she'd do with all her time if she wasn't working. She might gravitate toward the mall, to spend the money she was no longer earning. Laura shook her head. She didn't want to lose the self-reliance she'd established. Besides, working with people was fun. At least, it could be fun if a jealous boyfriend wasn't among your co-workers, she thought bitterly.

Sitting up on the bed again, Laura put her hand on Shelby's shoulder. Shelby had been too young to really understand what had happened when their father left. Though she clearly understood the situation now, she had not been affected by it as profoundly as Laura had been.

Shelby looked up from her stamps and searched Laura's face.

"I'm sorry I got upset with you," Laura said. "You know how I am."

Shelby nodded and smiled. Laura's quirks were all too familiar to her.

The awkward moment past, Laura ran down the list of places where she had applied for jobs that day: Fair Warning, the clothes store at the mall; Big Game Burger, the place to go "when you're on the hunt for a really BIG burger!" gushed the commercials; and finally, the hospital. When Laura told her sister about Buck, Shelby squealed with delight.

"And you're going out with him tonight, already!" She clapped her hands together. "You don't waste any time!"

Laura rocked backward on the bed, laughing. "Stop! It's not like we're going on a date. We're just going to a party so I can introduce him to some kids." Laura sat up and put her hands on Shelby's shoulders. "And what's more, you're going with us. We aren't even going to be alone."

"Wait a minute!" Shelby cried. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Come on!" Laura pleaded. "It'll be fun. Besides, if Buck turns out to be a jerk, I'll want you there for backup. Please? Please?" Laura began to tickle her sister. Shelby screeched and fell from her chair onto the floor in a fit of laughter.

"Uncle!" Shelby could barely speak. "I'll go! I'll go!"

Laura released her sister. "Good. I thought you'd see it my way. Come on. Let's have dinner ready before Mom gets home from work."

The girls worked together to make a pasta primavera from fresh vegetables. They were both excellent cooks. Even their mother agreed that the girls' cooking skills far surpassed her own. They were just draining the pasta, about ready to eat, when the phone rang.

"Hi, Laura?" came Buck's voice through the receiver.

"Yes, this is Laura." A small thrill shot through her.

"It's Buck… y'know? From the hospital." He seemed to think she might have forgotten him already. Endearing.

"I know that!" she told him. "It's only been a few hours."

"Yeah, I know, but…" He stopped, took a deep breath, and started again. "Are we still going to that party? Together, I mean?"

"Unless you're canceling on me," Laura said.

"No! I wouldn't do that. I just wanted to make sure we were still on."

"I've got your name in my date book. In ink." Laura could practically hear Buck blush on the other end of the line.

"Date? I, uh…"

"It's just an expression, Buck. I wouldn't be so presumptuous." She glanced over at Shelby, who was listening to Laura's end of the conversation with wonder. "It'll be you and me and Shelby. Can you come by around nine tonight?" Laura gave him their address, said good-bye, and hung up.

"I think he likes me," Laura told her sister. Shelby rolled her eyes as if to say, "Yeah, right." Laura ignored her. "And you know what else? If he does, I think that would be okay with me."

This time, Shelby pretended to gag.

* * *

After cleaning up the dishes, Shelby went to Laura's room to help her choose an outfit for the party.

"This isn't a royal ball!" sighed an exasperated Shelby. By now, Laura had tried on four outfits — and rejected them all.

"I know," Laura told her. "But I want to look nice for Buck. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"If you're looking for a long-term relationship, make yourself look like you do first thing in the morning," Shelby suggested facetiously. "If he likes you like that, then you know you have a chance."

"You're awful, Shelby!"

Shelby shrugged innocently. "I guess. But now you know why I don't go out. Too much trouble."

"It can be worth it," Laura insisted.

"Like the way Chester was worth it?" Shelby asked. She meant the comment to be funny, but Laura suddenly lost her sense of humor.

"You really are awful," Laura said, turning away. Shelby was on her feet instantly.

"I didn't mean it that way, Laura." They both understood that Laura was overreacting, but that still didn't excuse using the dreaded C-word.

"I know, Shel," she sighed. "It's not your fault he's a jerk."

"And not your fault, either!" Shelby added quickly. Then her eyes narrowed conspiratorially. "Is that why you're so excited to take Buck to the party tonight?"

"What do you mean?" Laura asked, as if thoroughly stumped.

"Well, won't it be nice to show up looking your best, and with *another* guy? Chester is bound to be there. That would be so in-your-face."

Laura stared at her sister, who had delicious revenge written all over her face. Sometimes Shelby's nasty side surprised Laura.

"He would be jealous, wouldn't he?" Laura pondered out loud.

"It'll serve him right!" Shelby stated emphatically.

"You ain't just whistlin' Dixie!" Laura concluded decisively, and both girls broke into a fit of giggles.

Laura decided to wear comfortable jeans and a fuzzy sweater. "Now your turn," she told Shelby.

"Nah," Shelby replied disinterestedly. "It doesn't matter what I wear anyway. Guys don't like bookworms."

"Gee, for a girl who knows so much, sometimes you don't know a thing!" Laura took her sister by the arm and steered her to her closet. "Here. Pick anything."

Shelby hemmed and hawed, but eventually she picked a denim skirt and pink blouse. Just as they were both putting on the finishing touches — gold bauble earrings — the doorbell rang. Laura clutched her sister by the shoulders as they both stared into the mirror.

"He's here! Wow. I can't believe how nervous I am." Releasing Shelby, Laura headed for the door. Shelby grabbed her arm and held her back.

"Jeez. Haven't you learned anything about playing hard to get?"

"Uh, then will you get the door for me?" Laura asked. "Tell him I'll be ready in a couple minutes."

"At least five minutes, I think," Shelby advised.

"Right," Laura agreed. "Be down in five minutes." From downstairs, the doorbell rang once more. With a wink, Shelby ran down the stairs to answer it.

Laura sat on her bed, fidgeting. This waiting game was silly, she thought. On the other hand, maybe she needed to learn to go slower. She could hear the front door open, then some muffled voices. Laura stood and almost raced down the stairs, but then sat herself back down. Finally, after four torturous minutes, Laura could wait no longer.

Laura found Buck sitting on the living room couch. Shelby was nowhere in sight. Buck didn't hear Laura approach, so when she said hello, he almost jumped out of his seat.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Laura giggled.

"You didn't scare me," Buck said, a little breathlessly. "It was your beauty that shocked me!" He extended the compliment rather boldly. A small wink acknowledged that even he realized the line was a bit hokey. Nevertheless, Laura blushed.

"Oh *please*!" was all she could say. She noticed his well-worn Levi's and dark purple oxford shirt. Around his neck he wore a leather thong necklace strung through several clay beads. He looked handsome. And the nervousness from the earlier phone conversation was gone. Laura found herself staring. Shelby's entrance broke the spell.

"There you are. I was just going to come up and get you." Shelby looked at her watch. "In a minute," she added in a stern tone. In one hand

she held a vase with a beautiful bouquet of flowers. These she handed to Laura. "Look what Buck brought for you."

Laura took the flowers and buried her nose in them. "They're beautiful! Thank you, Buck." Before she knew what she was doing, Laura kissed Buck on the cheek. Now it was Buck's turn to blush.

"You're welcome. I'm glad you like them." A hint of his earlier nervousness returned, but then, the kiss was probably unexpected.

"Before you get too excited," Shelby said, "he brought some for me, too. I just couldn't carry both vases."

"Oh, well," Laura stammered, somewhat embarrassed. "That was very nice of you," she told Buck. "Let's get to the party."

"Sounds good to me!" Buck said brightly. He led the way out to the car.

On the front doorstep, when Buck was just out of earshot, Shelby whispered into Laura's ear. "Your bouquet is much bigger than mine, by the way."

Laura looked at her sister with a raised eyebrow. "Sweet, isn't he?"

*** * ***

Buck drove a beat-up Datsun he introduced as Wilma. "It's practically a Stone Age car!" he exclaimed.

Laura told him a carefully cut version of "the movie," then Buck described his own situation.

"My mother died when I was very young. I miss her, though I barely remember her. My father never remarried."

"What brought you to Springwood?" Shelby asked.

"My father lost his job. He's an accountant. He found a new position here." He paused. "How about you?" he asked Laura. "You hear about any jobs?"

Laura shook her head. "Not since I talked to you after dinner."

"Oh, right," Buck said, shaking his head. "Wish there was something I could do for you."

Laura thanked him. "I wish there were something you could do, too," she said, throwing up her hands in defeat.

"Maybe I'll think of something." Buck's eyes seemed to lose focus, as if he was in deep thought. Laura became worried that he wasn't paying enough attention to his driving.

"Uh, Buck?"

"Sorry," he said, snapping out of his trance. "Was just thinking. You know, some of those places you applied to have a pretty high turnover. Maybe something will open up."

"I hope so, but I'm not holding my breath."

"Just you wait and see," Buck told her, the wheels in his mind spinning faster and faster.

Chapter 3

Once they turned onto Doug's street, his house was easy to find. It was the one where the loud music was blaring out of the windows, all of which were open on this mild summer evening. Doug's parents were out of town, and this was the kickoff to a week of freedom from parental restraints.

Laura entered the house without knocking, Buck and Shelby immediately behind her. Doug was upon them immediately.

"Laura! I'm glad you're here," he said, instantly wrapping his arms around her in a hug. "I can't believe I'm doing this!" He was a wreck. Hyper. The house was filled with other teens, hanging out, talking, drinking soda and beer, listening to music. The stress of doing something his parents would kill him for was practically killing him.

"It'll be all right," Laura said, hugging him back. They kept their arms around each other as Laura introduced Buck. "I met Buck at the hospital today. He's new to Springwood." The two boys shook hands, but Buck seemed strangely bewildered. Laura tried to reassure him. "I told you about Doug. He's my best friend."

Buck smiled then. "Good to meet you."

"You, too," Doug replied, and then turned to Shelby. "What the heck are you doing here? Not that I'm not happy to have you," he added quickly. "Just surprised."

"Laura dragged me out. She thinks this is my debutante ball or something."

"Well, I'm glad you came out," Doug told her, sincerely pleased to see her. "There's stuff to eat and drink in the kitchen. Help yourself." Then he leaned in to Laura and whispered, "I should tell you, Chester's here."

Laura decided to play it cool. "Not a problem," she whispered back, glancing at Shelby, who gave her a thumbs-up sign.

"Okay, then I've got to go look for Rayne." A sour expression wrinkled his face. "She's on the warpath tonight." With that, he took off for the rear of the house.

"Who's Rayne?" Buck asked as they made their way through the crowd toward the kitchen. "He doesn't seem to like her much." Shelby and Laura exchanged an amused, knowing glance, then burst into laughter.

"Rayne's his girlfriend," Laura told him. "But you're right. He doesn't like her much. That's what's so funny."

"Then why are they dating?"

"Because Rayne asked him out on one date," Laura explained. "Next thing he knew, she considered them boyfriend and girlfriend. At the time, Doug didn't see any reason not to just roll with it."

"Basically," Shelby added, "he had nothing better to do."

Buck just shook his head. "Weird."

"Not really," Laura told him. "It worked for both of them for a while. But now Doug is too much of a chicken to tell her that it isn't working for him anymore."

"Well, I think…" Buck started to say, but Laura cut him off with a look. Allison Heath, the assistant manager at Fair Warning, sat at the dining room table not far away. Even though they did not get along, Laura thought this might be her opportunity to feel Allison out about the clerk position at the mall.

"I'm sorry," she told Buck, her eyes focused on Allison. "Why don't you guys go get some drinks."

Shelby frowned, aware of what her sister was up to. "That's a lost cause, Laura, and you know it."

"Maybe," Laura said defensively. "Or maybe not. I have to try."

"Come on, Buck," Shelby said, taking him by the arm. "When Laura starts banging her head against a wall, it's not something you want to watch."

"You sure?" he asked Laura.

"Go ahead," Laura insisted. "Ignore Shelby. She's just being melodramatic. It'll only take me a minute."

Reluctantly Buck let Shelby lead him to the kitchen. Laura took a deep breath and entered the dining room.

"Hi, Allison," Laura said, knowing that her chumminess sounded entirely artificial.

"Laura," Allison said simply, with an arrogant smile.

"Um, I, uh," Laura stammered. "I was wondering about that job at the mall."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Laura," Allison purred, obviously not the least bit sorry. "The managers decided on somebody else today."

Laura tried to hide her frustration. Allison knew why Laura was looking for a job, and how desperate she must be to be kissing up to her.

In a tone totally devoid of sympathy, Allison said, "There were so many applicants for just one position. You know how that is."

"Yeah," Laura said dully, and began to turn away. Then, in a weak effort to pretend the job wasn't the only reason she had approached Allison, she turned back. "Well, anyway… who are you here with?"

Allison's left eyebrow arched evilly. "Oh, you don't know? I'm surprised Doug didn't tell you. I came with Chester. Hope that doesn't bother you."

"Not at all," Laura answered. Actually, she was far from bothered. If anyone deserved a creep like Chester, it was Allison. "In fact, I need to talk to Chester. Do you know where he is?"

"He went that way," she said, gesturing languidly toward the back of the house. "But that was a while ago."

Laura thanked Allison and went to look for Chester. She ran across Buck, who was talking to Rayne Wilcox, Doug's erstwhile girlfriend. Laura had a brief desire to join their conversation, to clue Buck in on her. But no one who spent more than a few minutes with Rayne could miss the fact that she was a very jealous girl trying to guard her territory. Laura continued searching for Chester.

She went out the back door, and found the backyard strangely empty. On a night as pleasant as this, she would expect more people to be outside. Maybe this was one of those midparty lulls, she thought.

Next to the garage stood a small, screened-in gazebo. Laura could see a single citronella candle burning in it, but could not tell if it was occupied or not. As she approached the gazebo, the sweet oily smell of the candle reached her nose. Laura half expected to discover two or three kids hidden just beyond the candle's weak yellow glow, tangled in a drowsy discussion of life, the universe, and how it all changes once you get to college. But the gazebo was empty.

Beyond the gazebo was another short stretch of yard, then a tall, vine-covered fence. But right now, the back area, far beyond the reach of the citronella candle's feeble light, was an infinite black space. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, however, lighter spots began to stand out from the black field. The vine's flowers. They reflected what little light was available and began to look like a dim freeze-frame of a fireworks show.

Wanting to get a closer look at the flowers, Laura walked completely out of the flickering sphere of the gazebo's light. Taking one bloom in hand, careful not to pull it from the vine, Laura bent to take a whiff. Just as she did so, a hand grasped her by the shoulder and spun her around. Panicked, Laura shrieked, but another large hand clamped hard over her mouth. A long, muscular arm quickly wrapped itself around Laura, and she found herself lifted and pressed against a strong chest. At the same time, the strong smell of alcohol and cigarettes threatened to overpower her. Thinking quickly, she kicked one foot backward and connected with a leg.

"Ow!" grunted a deep, familiar voice. The arms let go and she dropped a few inches to the ground.

"Chester! What the hell is your problem!" She swatted ineffectually at one broad shoulder. It was like smacking a concrete wall.

Chester's nickname was "The Chest." He was a gymaholic, whose rigorous workout schedule had produced a body of Olympian proportions. But along with the well-sculpted body came the conceit which had time only for those who admired him. Laura had been an admirer for a brief time. But not anymore.

"Hey, stop that!" Chester whined. He rubbed the spot where Laura had hit him, though clearly, he had felt no pain. With a dangerously smug look, he said, "I heard you were looking for me. Does that mean you're ready to kiss and make up?" He stepped forward and opened his arms. Laura stepped back quickly.

"Not a chance," she said, her voice quivering. She was still recovering from his surprise attack.

"Then why were you waiting back here for me? Aren't you ready to apologize? It's not too late, you know."

Laura's hands clenched in rage. His audacity was almost beyond comprehension. *"Me* apologize to *you?* You must be as drunk as you smell!" Chester crossed his arms as if offended. Not fully in control of herself, Laura jabbed a finger right into his chest. "You fired me, remember?"

Chester's eyes lit up with anger. "I gave you a choice."

Laura was almost speechless. Three weeks ago, she had been a lifeguard at the pool where Chester was the head lifeguard. "Listen, Chester. You had no cause to be so jealous. Doug is a friend. I told you that. You need to get the muscle out of your ears so you can hear better."

"I gave you a choice," Chester said again, as if to prove how dense his brain was. "Listen, I didn't decide on that budget cut. One lifeguard had to go. I let you decide. I thought it was pretty nice of me."

"Yeah. Some choice. Me or Doug. What was I supposed to say? It was completely unfair. I could get *you* fired for what you did."

"Why don't you try?" Chester replied.

"Because I've got better things to do than waste any more time on you, you moron." She was breathing heavily, with anger — and a little fear. Chester had reared up to full height. "You had no right to accuse me of cheating on you. Doug and I were friends long before I met you. And we'll be friends long after your muscles squeeze the last of your tiny brains out of your head. So stay away from me. Or I *will* go to the Bureau!"

Instantly Chester's eyes narrowed into slits. A large hand came down and grasped her shoulder. "I don't like the way you're talking to me, you know that?"

His grip was firm, and painful. He leaned down and breathed alcohol and smoke into her face. To keep from gagging, she turned away. "Let go of me," she whimpered. But Chester didn't move.

"Let her go," commanded a new voice. Chester and Laura both turned toward the silhouetted figure standing before the light of the candles. She recognized the voice — it was Buck.

"Oh, and who's gonna make me?" Chester glowered, puffing up and making Buck look even more like a stick figure by comparison.

Buck sighed with exaggerated boredom. "Couldn't you come up with something more original than that? Look, if we're gonna fight, shouldn't we just get to it?"

Chester laughed. "I'll crush you!"

"Every other supervillain from the dawn of comic books has used that line," Buck yawned. Then his body tensed and in a low, commanding voice, he said, "Make your move, buddy, or take off. Either way, make it snappy."

At first, Chester was too shocked to be angry. Then, blinking as if clearing his mind, he nodded. "Right. Sorry. I don't know what came over me." He started past Buck toward the house.

Laura knew Chester was faking, but she didn't have time to warn Buck before Chester's powerful fist was streaking toward his face.

With lightning reflexes, Buck sidestepped the blow and delivered one of his own to Chester's ribs with his elbow. The dodge, the rib pain, and his

drunkenness threw Chester terribly off balance. Before he could recover, Buck stepped in and kicked Chester behind one knee. Chester's leg buckled and he fell to the ground like he had been dropped from a roof. Buck stepped over him and reached a hand out to Laura.

"I guess we'd better go, huh?"

Laura stared dumbly at Buck's hand, then down at Chester, who was clutching his knee to his chest and groaning. Others were coming out from the house to see what was happening. Buck took Laura's hand and pulled her gently forward.

"Come on. It's okay."

In shock, Laura allowed herself to be led toward the house. The crowd parted for them. Then one girl cried out.

"He's getting up!"

Buck and Laura both turned just as a tremendous roar filled the air. Chester had catapulted himself at them, aiming for Buck. Pushing Laura out of the way, Buck met Chester, grabbing his outstretched arms. Rolling onto his back, Buck lifted his legs and pressed his feet against Chester's midsection. Continuing the roll, Buck pushed, launching Chester into the air. Chester landed on his back on the concrete patio. Buck, meanwhile, rolled deftly onto his feet, preparing for a counterattack. From the way Chester curled up into a ball on the patio, an attack was unlikely at best.

"Hey!" Doug shouted from the back door. Jumping down the three steps, he kneeled beside Chester. "You could have killed him!" he shouted at Buck.

"He was gonna kill me," Buck said, his breath coming in short gasps. "And he was hurting Laura."

Doug looked up at Laura, who nodded in support of Buck's story. But even this did nothing to quell Doug's anger.

"I don't care what happened, I don't like fighting at my house, under any circumstances."

"But…"

"Forget it!" Doug interjected. "You guys will have to leave." Buck started to protest again, but Laura came to his side and tugged his arm.

"He's right, Buck. Let's just go." Now it was Buck who allowed himself to be led away.

Shelby was waiting for them just inside the house. The three of them headed toward the door together.

As Buck unlocked his car, Doug's front screen door banged open. Out darted Allison, obviously in a huff. Chester stumbled out right after her, on a weaving path toward his car, an old Corvette Stingray. Doug came out then. He turned for a moment and called back to Rayne. "Come on. We have to get him home. We'll be back in a couple minutes."

Rayne came out and stood on the top step, her arms crossed defiantly.

"Rayne!" Allison called sharply. "You have to come sit in the back with me." Chester was now leaning against the Stingray, whistling to himself as if he didn't have a care in the world. "I sure don't want to sit with Chester."

Rayne stamped once in frustration, then started down the steps. Doug headed toward the car, keys jangling in his hand.

"Come on, Laura," Shelby said, urging her sister to get into Buck's car. Laura slid into the front passenger seat. Shelby had already taken her place in the back. Buck pulled away from the curb as the engine in Chester's Stingray turned over. As they passed by, Doug gave Laura a wry smile. Chester was slumped against his window, already fast asleep. Rayne glared from the backseat with Allison.

Laura looked back once they reached the end of the block. The Corvette's headlights angled out into the street behind them. Chester lived in the same general direction as Laura, so Doug would be following them for several blocks.

While they rode down a long block near Elm Street, headlights appeared in the distance heading their way. They were swerving from side to side, the driver apparently out of control.

"What's that?" asked Shelby, who was leaning forward from the backseat.

"Oh shit!" was Buck's only reply, because the lights were now heading straight toward them. "Hold on!"

Cutting the wheel sharply to the right, Buck jumped the curb with a violent lurch. The girls screamed. There was a thump and Shelby cried out in pain. Buck grunted as his chest hit the steering wheel. The car came to a rolling stop on someone's lawn.

Laura, secured by her shoulder belt, was unhurt. As she turned to check on Shelby, she caught a glimpse of the other car, a Cadillac, as it careened by. In the Caddy was an old man, clutching his chest with one

hand. The other hand was clawing at the steering wheel. Laura followed the Caddy's taillights as the car headed toward another set of headlights.

"Oh God, DOUG!" Laura screamed.

The Cadillac veered directly into the path of the Stingray. There was no escaping a collision this time. With a muffled crunch, the Cadillac broadsided the Corvette on the driver's side. Both cars seemed to jump into the air. Glass exploded.

The next moments were silent, but for the buzz of streetlights. Buck groaned and rubbed his chest. Shelby moaned in the backseat. From the wreckage down the street, she heard no sound at all.

Chapter 4

For the fourth time that night, Laura awoke to the sound of the car collision. And for the fourth time, she rushed to the window, only to find her street empty.

In her dreams, the details of the accident became more and more vivid. At first, the old man appeared as he had that evening: an agonized soul clutching his chest, oblivious to the havoc he was about to create. But by the fourth reenactment, the man had changed. His skin became slick and reptilian. With murderous glee, he drove deliberately at her friends. The way he smiled — he even winked at Laura as he drove past — it was obvious that he regarded the impending crash as sport. Laura's simultaneous feelings of premonition and helplessness threatened to overwhelm her.

The impact in the fourth dream that night was punctuated by an explosion. Somehow, Laura was transported into the inferno, treated to the grisly sight of Doug, Chester, Rayne, and Allison being roasted death. And then she realized that she had known, even before the headlights were weaving before them, that there would be a crash. The man in the car — the scarred one — had known he would wreak havoc. The terrible knowledge showed in his smile.

Turning away from the window, Laura wondered how her sister was doing. All of them had been taken to the hospital after the accident. Laura had sustained the least serious injuries, with barely a braise. Buck, Allison, and Doug were treated for minor cuts and braises and then released. Chester had suffered a serious concussion and a few deep cuts on his head. Shelby had hit the roof of Buck's car, and had been knocked out cold. Her concussion was not as serious as Chester's, but the doctors wanted to keep her overnight for observation. Laura had wanted to stay with Shelby, but her mother had convinced her to come home and return the next day.

Being home, however, had meant sleeping only long enough to fall into a violent dream that would awaken her in terror. Willing no longer to submit to the exhausting ordeal, Laura went downstairs to fix herself a cup of strong tea. As she waited for the water to boil, she thought of the old man in the Caddy. He was by far the worst off of everybody. At last report, he was in the cardiac care unit of the hospital, barely alive.

Steam curled up from the surface of Laura's tea and had a calming, almost hypnotic effect on her. The caffeine kept her awake, though, until first light, when she had breakfast, a shower, and then headed back to the hospital.

She arrived before visiting hours, so she decided to see if Buck had come in yet. She found him at his desk, with a large square bandage on his forehead.

Calling his name, Buck looked up quickly in surprise and winced. His hand instinctively went to his bandage.

"Sorry about that," Laura said.

"No prob." The dullness of his voice told Laura he had not slept much either. "You come to see your sister?"

"Yeah, but they won't let me in yet."

Buck's eyes darted to his wristwatch. "Yeah, too early. She's okay, though. I checked with a doctor when I came in."

"Will she be getting out today?" Laura asked hopefully.

"This afternoon," Buck assured her. "She's the lucky one. Your pal Chester will be in at least another day. The old guy may not make it out of here alive."

"Who was… is" — Laura corrected herself — "that guy anyway?"

"Warner Holbert," he said. "You'll never believe what he does."

Laura didn't have a clue.

"He's a headhunted He finds people jobs. If he lives, and he's not too pissed about the accident, maybe *he* can help you."

"Buck!" she gasped, shocked that Buck could think so opportunistically at a time like this.

Buck apologized quickly, then took Laura to Shelby's room. "We just gotta be quiet," he warned.

Silently they navigated the hallways. Laura was completely lost, but Buck knew exactly where he was going. Finally he stopped at Shelby's room and scanned the hallway. Laura knew he was breaking hospital rules. Putting one finger to his lips, he pushed the door open. Shelby lay in the same hospital bed she had occupied the night before, but now she seemed to be asleep instead of unconscious.

Laura noticed that the room was divided in half by a large, white curtain. She pointed at it, and Buck raised an eyebrow. With a nod, he consented to her peeking behind the curtain. To her surprise, Chester was in

the next bed. He sported a bandage much like Buck's, but it was soaked with blood. His mouth gaped open as if he were about to scream. Laura pulled back from the curtain. Buck shrugged, then pointed toward the door. It was time to leave.

Out in the hall, Laura asked about Chester. "He doesn't look so good."

"Oh, he'll be okay, eventually." Buck sighed. "They just want to run an MRI or a CAT scan, I forget which."

Hospital equipment designated by initials spooked Laura. Despite Buck's assurance, she felt frightened. She didn't like Chester much, but she didn't want to see him seriously hurt, either.

"What about Holbert? Can I see him?" she asked suddenly.

Buck took her to the cardiac care unit. The mass of monitors was mind-boggling. One of the machines beeped rhythmically to the beat of his heart. Liquids dripped from plastic IV bags to be fed directly into his veins. Based on her dream, Laura had expected to see some kind of demon in Warner Holbert, but she found nothing like that at all. Holbert was pale, his cheeks sunken in. His parchmentlike skin appeared ready to crumble into dust if she should reach over and touch it. She felt an overwhelming pity. Laura left the room with Buck two steps behind her.

"You look like you didn't sleep much last night," Buck remarked as they headed back to the administrative offices.

Laura shrugged. "I'm worried about Shelby. I don't want her waking up alone. Of course, Chester's there, but that's worse than waking up alone."

"She'll be fine," Buck assured her. "If all goes well, she'll be out early this afternoon." He glanced at his watch. "Tell you what. Go home and get some rest. Then come back here around twelve-thirty. I'll take you out to lunch, and by the time we come back, the doctors should be ready to release Shelby."

"But what if something goes wrong?"

"What could go wrong?" Buck asked calmly.

*** * ***

When Laura got home, she passed the news about Shelby on to her mother, who was still eating a relaxed breakfast. Laura found herself

resenting the way her mother seemed so blasé about Shelby. But she said nothing, chalking her feelings up to exhaustion. She went back to bed.

Surprisingly, a restful sleep quickly enveloped Laura. She didn't awake until sometime later when her bedside phone rang.

"Huh?" she breathed into the mouthpiece before she was fully awake.

"Am I waking you up?" From deep within her tunnel of sleep, Laura recognized Doug's voice.

"Uh-uh," she groaned. Laura found that she was never able to answer that question truthfully — or convincingly. As usual, Doug didn't bother to contradict her.

"Just calling to see if you're okay."

Laura told Doug she was fine, and that she had already been out that morning to check on Shelby. Less enthusiastically, she told him about Chester.

"I wish I felt worse for him," she admitted. "But he was such a jerk, and somehow, this all seems like his fault."

"He didn't give that guy a heart attack," Doug pointed out gently.

"I know, but…" At that moment, Laura's eyes focused on the dial of her alarm clock. It read 12:15 p.m. "I'm sorry, Doug, I have to go," she said, interrupting herself. Doug apparently mistook her tone of voice.

"Are you all right? Is your mom there? Should I come over?" he asked in a staccato burst of panic.

"No, no," Laura told him quickly. "I'm fine. It's just that I'm supposed to meet Buck for lunch in fifteen minutes. I'm going to be late." When the line was silent for several seconds, Laura thought Doug had hung up. "Hello?"

"I'm here," Doug replied in a withdrawn voice. "You're seeing Buck again?"

If it had been anyone else, Laura's defenses would have gone up and she would have moved forward carefully. But this was her best friend, so she could confront him directly.

"You probably think he's a jerk because of last night, but really, Doug, he was trying to protect me from Chester. Maybe he got a little carried away, but it was Chester who started the trouble."

"Yeah, but…" Doug seemed prepared to say more, but his voice just trailed off.

"I'll tell you about it, later," she said quickly. "You'll understand. Anyway, I have to go. I'll call you later. 'Bye!"

Laura hung up the phone, and as quickly as she could, threw on some clothes and straightened her hair. On her way out, her mother said she would meet Laura at the hospital when it was time to pick up Shelby.

* * *

"I'm sorry," Laura blurted out as she rushed toward Buck. Her watch read 12:47. "I overslept, and luckily the phone woke me up."

Buck seemed upset.

"I really am sorry," Laura told him. "I hope I haven't messed up your lunch hour."

"Nah, don't worry about it," he answered, shaking off his annoyance. "Let's go."

"Can we stop by Shelby's room on our way out?" she asked.

"As long as we make it quick," Buck told her, his voice clearly implying that he indeed had less time for lunch because she had been late. "She'll definitely be out today at two."

"Okay, I'll be fast," Laura insisted. "I just don't want her to find out I was here and didn't come in to see her."

Buck said that he understood, and together they went to Shelby's room. They found Shelby sitting up in bed, picking at a tray of hospital food. Laura nearly upset the tray when she hurried to give her sister a big hug.

"This is so cool!" Shelby gushed. "Thanks for taking me out last night. This has been the most excitement I've ever had!"

Laura had to laugh. Here was her little sister, sitting in a hospital bed after a car accident, saying she was having fun.

"You could have been killed!"

"Yeah," Shelby said, her enthusiasm endearing. "I've never almost been killed before. It makes living that much more exciting!"

"If you say so," Laura answered dubiously. Then she pointed toward the drawn curtain next to the bed.

"Oh, Chester," Shelby answered, rolling her eyes with a giggle. "He's out having some tests done right now. They're gonna keep him longer, but

he'll be all right. You'll never guess what the first thing he did this morning was."

Bodily functions came to mind, but Laura doubted that Shelby was referring to that. Laura gave up.

"He made a pass at me!" Shelby declared proudly. "For real! I was up first, and at some point I heard him groan. I looked over, saw he was looking at me, and the first words out of his mouth were 'You look beautiful in the morning. Can I see you like that sometime when they spring us from this joint?' "

"No!" Laura gasped. "That's disgusting!" Buck frowned.

"Yes!" cried Shelby.

"So what did you say?"

Shelby paused a few moments, to build suspense, then said, "What do you think? I made gagging noises until he got embarrassed and closed the curtain. Then they took him away and I haven't seen him since."

"Smooth operator, huh?" Buck said wryly. "Still playing the lout even when he might be braindamaged."

"That's assuming he had a brain to be damaged," Laura pointed out, with a sly wink to her sister. Secretly Laura was glad to hear that Chester was up to his usual tricks. He must not be too badly hurt.

"We gotta go now," Buck announced. "My lunch hour is half over."

Laura hurriedly told her sister that she would return after lunch.

"Why aren't you out looking for jobs?" Shelby asked before they could leave.

" 'Cause I'm looking out for my little sister, stupid," Laura said with a smile. "And this morning you were sure a lot easier to find."

*** * ***

In the car, Buck asked where she wanted to go. It couldn't be anything fancy, he said. They didn't have a lot of time left.

"How about the Big Game Burger drive-through?" he suggested. "We can eat at the park."

"Nah," Laura said. "I'm not in the mood for a big slab of red meat today. And besides, Rayne works there, and I don't want to run into her. No

doubt Rayne blames me for nearly getting her and Doug killed last night. Rayne can be that unreasonably spiteful, especially toward me."

In the end, they decided to go to the mall, where they would have some choices. As they drove, Buck fell quiet, as if in deep thought. When they were close to the mall, he spoke up tentatively.

"I've been meaning to tell you. Something happened this morning after you left. It's Holbert. We — the hospital, that is — lost him."

Laura bowed her head. "That's terrible. I hope he died peacefully, at least." Buck's reply came as quite a shock.

"That's just it," he said. "I mean they literally lost him. About two hours after you left, a nurse went in to check on him and found his room empty." Buck swallowed, hard. "Warner Holbert has vanished."

Chapter 5

"He never even regained consciousness," Buck said as he pulled into a parking space at the mall. "There's no way he could wake up and walk."

"He was so tied in with lines and leads, I'd think he would be strangled even if he could get up to try."

"The nurse found an empty bed, and a tangle of wires and tubes. He left — or was taken from — the room in a hurry. No one saw him wandering the halls. No one saw him leave the building. By now," Buck said as they entered the mall and headed for the food court, "Holbert's relatives have been told. And if the hospital doesn't find him quickly, they're in for a major lawsuit — whether he was kidnapped or just wandered off. Heads will roll."

Laura was stunned by the chain of events. First the fight at the party, then the accident. Now one of the victims had disappeared. Then she realized the beginning had really been before that, when Chester had fired her. Perhaps all the bad had started when she'd met Chester in the first place.

"Hey, you look spooked out," Buck observed. "Didn't mean to do that to you." His bright smile returned and melted away Laura's worries. "Let's grab some food and change the subject."

Now that seemed like a fair deal to Laura. But when they sat down to eat, conversation only came in fits and starts. They already knew the basics about each other, and beyond that, they had shared only the events of the past twenty-four hours. The effort they were making to avoid unpleasant conversation stifled natural conversation. Finally they gave up trying. When they finished lunch and found they had a few minutes left, they opted for a quiet walk around the mall. Laura found this pleasant, and Buck apparently felt the same way. Before they knew it, they were talking again, comfortably and without feeling wary of conversational land mines.

All was going well, until they passed the entrance to Fair Warning.

"What's wrong?" Buck asked when he noticed Laura's distress.

"I just can't believe I ever thought I'd work here with Allison as assistant manager." She looked into the store and saw a blonde girl at the register counter. "That's Beth Reed. She's a sophomore at Springwood who

basically worships Allison. Allison therefore thinks Beth is brilliant. It's a mutual leech society, as far as I'm concerned. But at least Beth has a job."

"Well, based on what I know of Allison, you're better off not working there."

"I know," Laura sighed. "I've told myself that so many times, but it's still disappointing."

They began walking again, but then a voice from inside Fair Warning stopped them.

"Laura! Stop! Hey!" Beth ran in front of a departing customer. When she reached them, she was out of breath. "Allison told me what happened last night. You okay?" Beth was actually very sweet, Laura thought, but also naive. No doubt Beth's association with Allison would ruin her.

"I'm okay, thanks." Quickly Laura introduced Buck. Then, trying to be polite, she asked, "You running the store by yourself?"

Beth blushed. "No, the manager is at lunch. I only started yesterday, so they wouldn't leave me here alone for long."

"You started yesterday?" Laura was seething with jealousy but trying to hold it in. "I bet Allison gave you a good recommendation."

"More than that," Beth replied, oblivious to the effect her words might have on Laura. "I was just in here shopping a couple days ago, wasn't even looking for a job, and Allison drags me over to her manager. She hired me on the spot, can you believe that!" Laura felt her composure slipping. Buck must have noticed.

"Lucky you," he said with thinly veiled anger. "Too bad for all those others who applied and actually needed a job."

Beth sensed that the mood of the conversation was changing, though she didn't know why or what to do about it. "The manager told me they were having trouble finding someone. They really appreciated Allison finding someone like me."

Laura reacted as if punched in the stomach. "Ouch! I put in an application a week ago."

"That can't be!" Beth said with sincerity. "I don't think they'd pass you up." Then, when she realized what she was saying, Beth added sheepishly, "But I'm new here, so I don't know how they work."

"Uh-huh," Laura replied. The idea that she had been passed over was a tremendous blow to her ego. She was about to walk away, but Buck spoke up.

"Well, some information has changed since you filled out that application, Laura." He took her by the hand and practically dragged her into the store. She had no idea what he was talking about. Beth followed them toward the register, also confused. "Beth, would it be hard to find Laura's application so she could update it?"

"Not really," Beth said hesitantly. "All the applications are kept in a file in the back."

"Can you get Laura's for her?" Buck smiled like a shark.

"I'm not supposed to leave the sales floor unattended," she protested weakly.

"That's okay…" Laura began, but Buck cut her off.

"Don't worry, we'll watch the floor for you." He leaned in, all teeth. "I promise we won't steal anything."

Beth backed up two steps, then looked anxiously at Laura. Buck's behavior was beginning to bother Laura. Frowning at Buck, she turned back to Beth and assured her that the store would be safe in their hands for the minute she was gone. Only then did Beth back into the doorway that led to the stockroom and manager's office. As soon as she was gone, Laura turned to Buck.

"I thought you had to get back to work."

"Just hang loose," he replied smoothly, looking past her. He gazed at the doorway to the stockroom, as if he could see what Beth was doing. Laura simply crossed her arms and waited. When two minutes passed and Beth had not returned, Laura started to wonder. Buck simply stood there, looking quite satisfied with himself. After another thirty seconds, Beth finally emerged from the doorway.

Empty-handed.

"Sorry, guys, I can't find it," Beth said, cringing as if they would strike her for being incompetent.

"It's not in the file?" Buck asked. Beth shook her head. "Did you check on the manager's desk?" Beth nodded.

"If Laura was up for the job, it might have been there. But it isn't. Some others are, not hers."

Laura's jaw dropped. "It got lost?" she cried. "Then I never had a chance to be considered."

Bern's sympathy was immediate and sincere. "I'm so sorry. I guess you could fill out another one," she offered weakly.

"It's too late for that, isn't it?" Buck barked, his anger now fully revealed.

"I'm sure it's just a mistake," Beth said in a tiny voice.

"Well, I'm not so sure," he growled. "When's your friend Allison working next?"

"Urn, tomorrow night, I think," Beth squeaked.

"Well, you tell Allison that Laura and I will be back tomorrow night to discuss with her — and the manager — the matter of Laura's missing application."

"Uh, okay, sure." Beth was wide-eyed with fear. Just then, some customers entered, giving Beth a reprieve. "Look, I gotta take care of some customers." With that, Beth turned and left them.

Buck and Laura walked quickly to the parking lot. Halfway there, Buck burst out laughing.

"What's this all about?" Laura demanded. "How could you bully that girl over something that clearly wasn't her fault?"

"I know it wasn't her fault," he responded, his laughter dying down. "But it wasn't a mistake either." And like that, his mood whiplashed back to dead seriousness.

"What are you talking about?" Laura demanded as they climbed into the car and got under way.

"Your application wasn't lost. Allison removed it from the file purposely," he stated bluntly.

Laura thought it over. All things considered, she wouldn't put such a thing past Allison. "You have no proof of that," she said. "And even if that were so, why take it out on Beth?"

"Right, I have no proof, but I'll bet you a million bucks that that is what happened. As for Beth, well, I'm sorry, but obviously she doesn't realize what a bitch her so-called friend Allison is. Think of it as a little negative reinforcement — if this is the kind of thing she can expect to happen being hooked up with Allison, maybe she'll get wise."

"You have no right to interfere like that!"

Buck just shrugged. "Allison obviously didn't hesitate to interfere in your attempt to get a job." Buck just looked at her as if she should know better.

"Okay, but there's nothing we can do about it."

"But we already did. We gave Beth a little insight into her idol's real personality. And Allison's gonna sweat, thinking we're gonna make trouble for her."

"We are not going to make trouble for Allison." Laura felt stunned by the direction of their conversation.

Again Buck shrugged as if it was no big deal. "I guess you're right. We can't prove anything. But she'll sweat it out until after tomorrow. And maybe next time, she'll think twice before screwing someone over like that."

Laura couldn't even reply. Buck was taking pleasure in intimidation, manipulation, and revenge. She found it disgusting. She stared out the window.

"You're angry, aren't you?" Buck's voice softened suddenly. Laura continued to stare out the window. "Look, maybe you're used to taking garbage from people, but I'm not. I learned karate when I was little because big kids used to beat me up almost daily. I've learned that you have to defend yourself. You're not defending yourself, so I'm trying to help. Can you accept that?"

"I never asked you to defend me," she murmured.

"I know. But I don't mind defending you. I like you."

At that, Laura turned. His aggressive behavior was gone. He was speaking like an earnest child who just wanted to do good and be liked. Laura sighed.

"I like you, too, Buck. But Chester was a bully. I'm not going to replace one bully with another." Already she had forgiven him. He had just gotten carried away.

"All right, I won't do it again. I promise." Then very quietly, and sweetly, he added, "Because I want you to like me." It was this little-boy quality that Laura found attractive in Buck. Using a little positive-reinforcement tactic of her own, she gave Buck a peck on the cheek, showing that she approved of this side of him. Perhaps it would be enough to help hold his temper at bay, she hoped.

Buck blushed at the kiss, but didn't say anything. When they arrived at the hospital, it was almost two o'clock, and Buck was late. Shelby was due to be released in a few minutes. Buck hurried to his desk, telling Laura that he would call her later.

Mrs. Walcutt was signing the release papers when Laura arrived at Shelby's room. Shelby had been given a clean bill of health. Laura found her sister as eager to get out of the hospital as she herself would have been.

"Okay, okay. This isn't quite as exciting as I first thought," Shelby admitted as they exited the room. "Hospitals are boring and stinky."

Laura snickered. It had not taken very long for reality to catch up with her sister. But her amusement was short-lived as a voice called out from behind the divider curtain.

"Thanks, I was worried about you, too."

Laura stopped. Focused on her sister's release, she had forgotten about Chester. It had been a blissful feeling, she realized, but now she had been reminded of his presence. Laura told Shelby and her mother to go on without her. Shelby gave her a stern look, but Laura waved her away.

After they left, Laura walked to the other side of the curtain to Chester, who sat up with his arms crossed sullenly.

"How were your tests?" she asked halfheartedly.

"To tell you the truth, they found some weird spots," he grumbled, not looking at her. "They're trying to figure out whether or not I have a blood clot or something."

The helplessness in Chester's voice pierced Laura's defenses. She'd never heard him sound this way. Forgetting herself, she placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. One of his large hands clamped down on hers, pinning it in place.

"Don't worry about me," Chester snarled, the sweet act over. "You're gonna need to worry about your new boyfriend once I get out of here."

Laura pulled her hand free and stood back against the wall. She was out of his reach now. To come at her, he would risk dislodging the tubes embedded in his arm.

"You're crazy," she gasped.

"That's right, Laura. Crazy about you." He was clearly mocking her. "I won't hurt you, but you should tell Buck that just because he's new in town doesn't mean he can make moves on the first girl he sees."

Giving Chester's bed a wide berth, Laura began to edge out of the room.

"And while you're at it," Chester continued, "tell him I don't appreciate being made a fool of in front of my friends. Allison dumped me because of him. She says I embarrassed her."

"For once, I'd have to agree with her," Laura called from the doorway. "You were out of control last night. You still are. Leave me alone, and leave Buck alone. Just get over yourself," she hissed, and turned to go.

"You know, your sister sure is cute," he said almost inaudibly. But Laura heard him quite clearly. Abruptly she spun around, eyes blazing.

"You stay away from Shelby," she growled, tapping into a previously unknown store of anger. If looks could kill, Chester would have been vaporized at that moment. His smug grin faltered briefly, then returned.

"You're not your sister's keeper, y'know," he whispered in that infuriatingly soft voice.

Laura spun on her heels and ran from the room. She ran not in fear of Chester, but of herself. What terrified her was the feeling that, had she remained in the room a moment longer, she would have killed him. And even worse, she would have enjoyed it.

Chapter 6

As Laura drove home, all the fear, frustration, and anger of the past few weeks poured out. Her face felt so hot, she imagined her tears boiling the moment they touched her cheeks. Down the street from her house, she saw her mother's car in the driveway. Not wanting anyone to see her this way, Laura drove around the block to give herself time to compose herself.

When she had circled the block and returned home, she found the driveway empty. Laura entered the silent house and didn't even bother to call out. She went to the kitchen table, where her mother usually left messages for her. But this time the table was clear of everything except place mats. They had gone out and she did not know where. Laura felt dramatically alone.

Tears began to well up once more. It was unlike Shelby and her mother to exclude Laura like this. She felt a dark cloud hovering over her shoulder. Laura lifted the telephone receiver to call Buck. Suddenly a near stranger seemed like her only friend. But did he really understand her well enough to comfort her right now? Or was it too soon for her to be crying on his shoulder? She paused, holding the phone out in front of her. No. It was too soon to be dumping on Buck. He would consider her high maintenance. She had to call Doug.

Pressing the receiver to her ear, Laura began to dial. Instead of ringing, she heard a voice.

"H-hello?"

"Doug?"

"Yeah," he said. He sounded dazed. "What's up?"

"Did the phone ring on your end?" Laura was a little off balance herself.

"Uh, yeah." But Doug seemed unsure.

"Wow. It didn't ring at all on this end. You must have answered it quick."

"It was right next to me, I guess."

Doug's answer disappointed her. She had hoped he'd coincidentally picked up the phone to call her at the same moment.

"I didn't wake you up, did I?" It was late afternoon, but Doug sounded so bleary.

"No, not at all," he replied more energetically. If he had been asleep, he was awake now. "Uh, how did it go at the hospital?"

"Good and bad," she said in a wary voice. "Good in that Shelby was released and she seems fine. Bad in that I saw Chester."

"What happened?"

"He's out of control, Doug," Laura said. "He tricked me into coming close so he could grab hold of me."

"Did he hurt you?" Doug asked quickly, anger flaring in his voice.

"No," Laura reassured him just as quickly. "It hurt, but he didn't hurt me, if you know what I mean. But he threatened Buck, and blamed him for what happened at the party last night. I guess Allison broke up with him, so that's apparently Buck's fault as well."

"Oh, he's just got his hackles up." Doug's voice sounded calmer, but Laura couldn't tell if the anger had gone away or he was disguising it.

"Maybe. But, Doug, he sounded so serious. This may sound silly, but he seems to be obsessed with me. I mean, he held me tight enough to cause bruises, threatened to beat up someone he thinks I'm dating, which I'm not, and all the while he says he's crazy about me. I'm beginning to think he's just crazy." Laura could feel her self-control slipping. Her voice trembled. "I'm scared. He even mentioned Shelby, and that's what scares me the most."

"What did he say about Shelby?"

"He said he likes her. I think he expects me to be jealous, but I'm angry, and afraid. Shelby's younger. She doesn't have a lot of experience with guys. Someone like Chester could really hurt her. He could make her feel special, then get her caught up in his ego problems."

"Like anyone else I know?" Doug asked.

"That's the point. I've dated before, and I was still taken in. I mean, the guy's gorgeous — that's the first thing you notice about him. It can blind you to everything else wrong with him. Which is, in fact, everything else."

Doug was silent for a moment. Then he told her, with a bit of forced cheer, "So you'll have a talk with Shelby, right? Give her the score on Chester. Then it's no problem."

"Yeah," Laura sighed. But she wasn't sure. The issue of Shelby dating was uncharted territory.

"I'm sure you'll bring her around," Doug told her.

Strange. It sounded like Doug was taking Shelby's involvement with Chester for granted. Laura had only been considering it as an unlikely possibility. Usually Doug attempted to be more positive.

"Well, Chester and Allison weren't the only ones who broke up last night," Doug said, and took a deep breath before continuing. "I finally got the guts to tell Rayne it wasn't working out."

"That's great!" Laura exclaimed enthusiastically before she could catch herself. Instantly she felt embarrassed about her expression of obvious joy. "I'm sorry, Doug."

"No, I'm glad. Rayne didn't take it well, though." By the sound of his voice, she had taken it very badly indeed. "But I never really liked her that way in the first place. I was just, I don't know." He fumbled with his words. "Well, you know. Rayne was high maintenance, but at first, it was better to have her than to have no one. Last night I just changed my mind. The whole relationship wasn't really fair to either of us."

Doug was echoing what many people had been saying for a long time, but Laura didn't point that out. Instead, she asked, "Do you think you and she can be friends?"

Doug chuckled stiffly. "Let's just say I think you and I both should stay out of her path for a while."

"Me?" Laura asked, but really, she knew what he was talking about. Just as Chester had been jealous of Doug, no doubt Rayne blamed Laura for her problems with Doug. Oh well. Doug had the right idea. Stay clear and eventually Rayne would get over it. Maybe Rayne and Chester should hook up, she thought grimly. Now *that* would be a pair.

"So how are things with you and that Buck guy?" Doug asked suddenly.

"Doug! I only met him yesterday."

"I know," Doug said sheepishly. "But you seem to like him."

"Well, that's a complicated one," Laura assured him. She would need Doug's help figuring out some of Buck's behavior.

Just as she was about to begin describing Buck, she heard soft footsteps approaching. Laura spun around and discovered Shelby standing in the doorway.

"You're home?" Laura asked in surprise.

"You called me, remember?" answered Doug.

"I'm talking to Shelby. Let me call you back, okay?"

"Okay. Talk to you later."

After hanging up, Laura turned back to Shelby.

"I thought you and Mom went out."

"Mom wanted to," she said in a yawn. "But I was tired, so I went up for a nap. I guess Mom went out anyway. Who was that on the phone?"

"Doug. He asked how you are."

"That's nice of him," Shelby answered with a tired smile. "What else did he have to say?"

"He and Rayne broke up," Laura told her. She was about to go on when the phone rang.

"Hiya, gorgeous!" sang Buck. "You're hard to get ahold of. Your phone's been busy forever!"

Buck's cheerful tone caught her off guard. It seemed forced. "What's up?"

"Nothing," he said, his voice nearly singsong. "So who were ya talking to?" His tone couldn't disguise the suspicion in his voice.

"A friend called," she stated simply. Laura had no reason to lie to Buck, but it wasn't any of his business if she didn't want it to be. Still, he persisted in his overly pleasant interview.

"Anybody I know?"

"An out-of-town friend," she replied, vaguely annoyed. His questions had the ring of a jealous boyfriend.

"Let's go to a movie tonight," he proposed, abruptly changing the subject. "My treat!"

"Well," she answered slowly. She turned and noticed that Shelby had left the room. "I have to check with Shelby. Now that she's home, she may want to do something tonight."

"She can come with us," Buck offered.

"I don't know, Buck. This might be a girls'-night-out kinda thing. You understand."

"Sure, I understand," he said brightly. "But your sister gets to see you every day. I'm not that lucky!"

And this time, Laura knew she wasn't misreading him. Buck apparently was way ahead of her in the relationship department — he seemed to think they were having one. This was a bad way to start, but

Laura thought that if she communicated her feelings up front, maybe Buck would understand. That way a relationship might develop more naturally.

"That's very sweet, Buck," she told him, unable to purge the slightly patronizing taint from her voice. "I like you, and would like to go out with you again, but I'm not looking for a boyfriend right now. I have a lot of other things to deal with right now. Can we slow down and just be friends?" Laura was impressed with her own ability to come up with the right words at the right moment. Usually she just let things go, hoping they'd get better, until they got out of hand. The way it had gone with Chester. Luckily, Buck took her little jerk on his reins fairly well.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I can be a little over-eager. I mean, you're the first person I've met here, and you seem real nice. Can I call you later, though? Just to talk? Or tomorrow if you want me to hold off longer?"

Laura had to smile. "Of course you can call," she told Buck. "I'm sorry if I'm being a little resistant, but you know why, right?"

"I was there last night, remember?" Laura winced a bit, remembering. "I'm sorry I won't be seeing you tonight, but I understand. I'll call you later to see how you're doing."

That sounded fine to Laura, who told him so and then said good-bye.

She found Shelby in the kitchen trying to decide what to do about dinner. While Laura set the table, she related the story of her encounter with Chester.

"Then he said he thought you were cute," Laura said, concluding the story. "But it came out as more of a threat than a compliment." She watched Shelby for her reaction, hoping her scrutiny wasn't too obvious.

"Yuk!" Shelby answered with great distaste.

"I was worried you would be flattered." This only made Shelby laugh.

"Big hairy NOT!" she giggled. "He's such a jerk. I'd have to be a total moron to listen to anything he said, after the way he treated you, and after what happened last night."

Laura's relief was so profound that she didn't mind if Shelby saw it. "Good. But like I said, he sounded threatening, like he might come after you — I mean hit on you — to make me jealous or something." Shelby laughed once more.

"Oh, come on!" Shelby wasn't taking her seriously now, but at least she didn't have to be convinced that Chester was bad news. "Don't worry, if he tries anything, he won't get anywhere."

That issue dealt with, Laura and Shelby discussed the party, the accident — Shelby was shocked to hear about the disappearance of Warner Holbert — Doug and Rayne's breakup, and Buck. Shelby listened, as usual, patiently and with interest.

"Buck definitely has a crush on you," she stated flatly when Laura finished. "Anyone could see that a mile away."

"But he hardly knows me. Or me, him," Laura pointed out.

Shelby shrugged. "You did the right thing laying it out for him right off the bat like that."

"I want to be friends, but I don't want to lead him on.

Shelby wrapped a consoling arm around her sister. "Don't worry. If he can't take just being friends with you, it won't be your fault. I just wonder…?" Her voice trailed off cryptically.

"What?"

"Buck may accept that you feel purely platonic right now, but still may think he's got a chance. He may be trying to figure out just what will win you over." Shelby stopped to think, then said, "It could be just a lot of phone calls, a lot of talking so you learn more about him."

"He did want to call and talk later," Laura remembered. If her sister was right, he may not have backed off after all, but just chosen a different tactic. But Shelby shook her head.

"No, after what you've told me, Buck is more a man of action. It's nothing he'll say that will win you over. It will have to be something he must do." Shelby nodded slowly, the idea slowly dawning on her. "Yes, he will perform some act of chivalry, just for you."

"Like what?" asked Laura, dreading a prospect that she could not yet conceive.

"I don't know," Shelby told her. "But prepare to be swept off your feet."

"I hope not," Laura groaned. "I don't want him to be trying hard to please me. It might rain whatever feelings I do have for him."

Pushing aside such worries, Laura finished helping Shelby with dinner. Their mother came home, and the three enjoyed a meal, followed by a Brad Pitt movie. All three women sighed. Brad was so dreamy.

Buck called twice during the movie. The first time, Laura took the call, but cut the conversation short because she didn't want to miss one frame of Brad. Buck gladly hung up. He called again before the end of the movie,

but Laura, Shelby, and their mother had all agreed to let the answering machine pick up. Buck's voice on the machine seemed oddly anxious. He asked Laura to call him. She considered it for a moment, then decided she'd rather see another movie first. Their mother begged off immediately, citing exhaustion from a long day. Shelby went to bed early as well.

Left to watch the second movie alone, Laura fell asleep in front of the television. She dreamed that Chester and Buck were preparing to duel — ten paces, turn and shoot — for her affections. In the dream, Laura had secretly rigged their guns to explode, killing both of them. When this happened, she rode off into the sunset with her chosen suitor: Brad Pitt.

* * *

The Springwood mall was always closed by ten o'clock. But on some nights, movement could be detected inside Fair Warning well after the closing. These were the evenings that Allison Heath was the closing manager. As a key employee, it was her responsibility to lock the store up at the end of the business day. Allison considered this a privilege — particularly on the day of a big shipment. Often she would stay for hours, winding down from her day, indulging in her favorite hobby: trying on new clothes. Happily, a particularly large shipment of fabulous fall fashions had just arrived.

Allison had a lot of winding down to do. The stress of supervising the receipt and display of new clothing was almost more than Allison could take.

Slipping into a sleek, black skirt, she sighed heavily, trying to exhale her day. The last few had been hell. She had endured the party, the accident, and finally, her fight with that loser Chester.

To hell with him, Allison thought mildly, getting a significant thrill from the faux-diamond bracelet she clipped to her wrist. Chester was officially cut loose.

Buck Lochner, however, was another story. The thought of him made her pulse quicken. He had actually stopped by the store! If only she had been there. When Beth had told her that Buck and Laura had stopped by, she didn't know how to take it at first. Of course, Buck's suspicions were right on target: Laura would have been hired in an instant had anyone at

Fair Warning's management ever seen her resume. But Allison had buried it first — in the trashcan. She had been the last to see it, unless someone on the janitorial staff had caught a glimpse of it late at night.

A smile crept over Allison's lips. She looked at the black velvet cocktail shoes she had slipped on her feet. They were ultraslim and sleek, with low heels. They looked as good as they felt.

Laura's resume. Somehow, Buck had figured it out and had threatened to go to the managers. It all seemed like a joke at first. But as the day wore on, the humor of the situation wore off. Soon she was left with the growing fear that Buck would actually carry out his threat. She kept telling herself that he had no proof, but even that didn't dispel her fears. Allison had practically forced Beth down the managers' throats, and Beth wasn't turning out to be a very good employee. She wasn't well liked by the other staff at all.

So Allison's fears took firm root and grew strong. Then Buck appeared at the front of the store about ten minutes before closing. He stopped, looked in directly at her, and glared. His look clearly suggested that he intended to do more than just complain to the managers about her. Allison was frightened. But just as she turned to pick up the phone to call security, his expression changed. He smiled, then just walked away.

Allison shooed out the rest of the employees and closed the store quickly. Finally alone, she wondered if she could still call security after all. Had Buck gone, or could he be waiting for her out by her car? Just then, a stray piece of packing popcorn on the register counter reminded her of the new shipment of clothing. This brought a certain clarity and focus to her mind. She certainly wasn't going to let Buck spoil her ritual. If he was out there, he'd have a long wait.

Damn the torpedoes! Allison Heath had clothes to try on.

For the two hours that followed, Allison pretended to be every type of runway model, wearing every combination of outfit available to her. She saved the best — the sleek black dress — for last. It was simple and sexy — perfect for a night of clubbing. Unfortunately, she wasn't old enough to get into bars yet, but she'd been to a funeral or two, and this skirt might just be perfect for that, too.

Allison stepped out of the dressing room and in front of the three-way mirror. Then she gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth in shock.

She looked ten times sexier than she had expected. Twirling the skirt, she tossed her head at the same time, pretending she was in slow motion like in a shampoo commercial on television. No doubt about it, she thought: In this dress, she could ruin a funeral by bringing the dead guy back to life.

Her exultation was cut short by a movement. Behind her, a shape rose up. The mirrors showed six people: three reflections of Allison and three of her visitor. Twelve eyes. But six of them burned with utter hatred.

Spinning around, Allison tried to stifle her fear.

"Hey! What are you doing here?"

Allison wanted to say more, but lost her voice when caught in the cold gaze of the visitor. She stood paralyzed, and for a moment, resembled one of the impossibly slim, but fashionably dressed, mannequins in her store. The next moment found her moving again — clawing at the belt that the visitor had looped deftly around her throat. The belt was biting into Allison's neck, cutting off her air. It didn't even occur to Allison to hit or claw her attacker. She just kept trying to loosen the belt around her throat, digging into her own skin with French-manicured nails.

Suddenly Allison was jerked upward as her attacker lifted her with impossible strength. Since the belt was used as a handle, the sudden motion nearly broke her neck. That would have been merciful. Instead, it merely constricted her throat more, crushing her larynx with great pain, but not killing her. The attacker wrapped the end of the belt securely around the light fixture hanging from the ceiling, then stepped back.

Allison's body went limp. As she awaited death, spinning slowly in midair, she thought of her parents, of how she had been such a bitch to so many people. She thought of school and of hotels and chicken wings. Her oxygen-starved brain was shutting down. Her vision was dimming. During one revolution, she caught sight of herself in a mirror and her last thought was of how hot she looked in black velvet.

Chapter 7

Months had passed since any bizarre murders had taken place in Springwood. Some had started to believe that Death had taken a summer vacation. But the summer died along with Allison Heath. The shattering of optimism resulted in feelings of devastation and hopelessness that were greater than usual. A winter cloud passed over and remained.

Laura's first thought when she heard the news shocked her even more than the murder itself. Instead of sympathy for Allison, a cold part of her mind homed in on the fact that there was now a job opening at Fair Warning. Even as she recoiled from the thought, her desire to be employed pushed her back toward it. Laura was so appalled with herself that she became withdrawn, not even confiding in Shelby, who could tell something was wrong. During Laura's internal struggle, Buck called.

"Jeez!" he chuckled. "I know you thought that job was to die for, but to kill for?"

"What are you suggesting?" Laura snapped. An immense sense of guilt overwhelmed her.

"Whoa, nelly! I was only kidding."

"I don't think that was very funny. Allison and I may not have gotten along, but she didn't deserve what happened. And I would never have hurt her."

Buck's tone became conciliatory. "Of course not. I was totally out of line and I'm sorry." He uttered a self-conscious chuckle. "Boy, am I the charmer or what?"

"Don't worry," Laura sighed. "I'm just kinda freaked out."

"I am, too," admitted Buck. Then he added awkwardly, "I guess I was just trying to beat you to the punch."

"What do you mean?"

"I figured you'd think I did it," he said quietly.

"Because of what you said at the mall?" Laura was finally able to laugh. "That's about as silly as you thinking I did it. I mean, it was just a crummy little job."

"I'm glad you think that way," Buck replied. But oddly, he was not joining in on the joke. "So then you wouldn't be afraid to go to a movie with

me?"

"Of course not!" Buck might act strangely sometimes, she thought, but he was no one to be afraid of.

"Great! Then I'll pick you up in an hour."

"Tonight?" she asked, a bit taken off guard.

"Perfect. It'll take your mind of all this bad stuff. See y a later!"

Then the line went dead. Somehow, he had managed to wrangle a date with her when she least expected it. She certainly didn't want to go out. Depressing the receiver button, Laura prepared to call him back to cancel, but stopped her fingers before she dialed. Maybe he had ambushed her because he knew it was the only way to get her to agree. And maybe that wasn't so bad. Laura found herself surprisingly calm now. Buck's phone call had grounded her, stopped her mind from spinning in the same maddening circles it had been spinning in all day. Perhaps his new perspective was just what she needed.

As she went up to her room to change, though, Laura felt her mind slipping backward. She remembered her conversation with Shelby. Shelby had predicted Buck would try to find some way to prove himself to Laura.

That would be totally out of proportion to whatever «crime» Allison had committed against Laura. Buck would have to be crazy.

Crazy.

Laura gulped. When told she didn't suspect him, he'd simply said he was glad. No laughing. Just relief. Relief because he was innocent? Or relief because he was guilty and wanted to make sure the only person who would know he had a motive was on his side?

Stop it! Laura shouted inside her head. Crazy? I'll give you crazy! Thinking that a guy you just met would hurt, let alone kill, another person just because he had a crush on you. Now, that was crazy. And arrogant. He couldn't like her that much.

Could he?

Laura was pulled from the quicksand of suspicion this time by the ringing of the phone. She picked it up at the same time Shelby picked up in her room. They both said hello at the same time. There was a moment of silence, then a click, followed by a dial tone.

"That's the third one today!" Shelby said, annoyed.

"Probably a wrong number," Laura told her.

They both hung up. No sooner had they hung up than it rang once more. Laura answered it in a flash. This time Shelby did not pick up the phone. And there was a caller.

"Hey," Doug said somberly. "Did you hear about Chester?" Laura hadn't. "The police took him in for questioning about Allison's murder."

Laura couldn't believe it. "They took him out of the hospital?"

"That's the thing," Doug told her. "They released him earlier in the day. His tests all came out negative. And someone, they don't know who, tipped off the police that he and Allison had a big fight."

"The breakup?" Laura realized. "They hadn't been going out long enough for it to be that big."

"That's what I thought." Doug was speaking cautiously. "But I remembered what you told me about how he was acting. You didn't call the police about that, did you?"

So there it was. Doug thought she had directed the police to Chester as a form of revenge. She was about to become angry. Then came a stronger feeling: regret. Regret that she *hadn't* done that.

"You did call, didn't you?" Doug asked, jarring her out of her reverie. There was a note of panic in his voice. He had taken her silence as an admission of guilt. Laura jumped to dispel the notion.

"No, Doug, I didn't. Believe me. I was just shocked that you even asked." She didn't want him to know what she was really thinking. That Chester deserved to squirm, even if he was innocent, which he probably was.

"Oh, okay, you scared me for a second." It was clear to Laura that Doug didn't quite believe her yet, but was giving her the benefit of the doubt. Laura forgave him. Everyone was out of sorts because of the murder. "Listen, can we get together and talk?"

Laura checked her watch. Time was marching on and she hadn't even picked up her majorette's baton yet. "Actually, Doug, Buck's coming to pick me up in a little while and I have to get ready. Can't we just talk right now?"

"No, I need to see you in person." He could barely disguise his disappointment at not being able to meet with her. "We can do it another time," he added, deflated.

"Are you all right?" Laura was concerned now. She had never heard him like this. "I could cancel."

"No," he said quickly. The bit of cheer in his voice was entirely manufactured — and badly at that. "You have fun. We can get together tomorrow. Is that all right?"

"Okay," she assured him. "Gotta get back to pounding the pavement tomorrow afternoon, I think. This not working is driving me crazy! I've got too much time on my hands, and my mind just revs and revs."

"I know how that is," Doug commiserated. He was sounding more like himself again. "Something will come up for you, I'm sure." Then he hung up.

Everyone was so certain she'd find a job, Laura thought glumly as she hung up the phone. Everyone but her.

There as a knock on her bedroom door and it swung open. Shelby strode in with a frown on her face.

"Buck here already?" Laura asked worriedly.

Shelby's frown deepened. "Buck? Wasn't that him on the phone?"

"Nope. That was Doug. Buck's picking me up."

"Doug?" she asked. "Huh." Shelby went silent.

"You okay?" Laura was concerned. Her sister was acting strangely.

"Just feeling kinda crummy." Shelby shrugged blandly. "I think I've got a cold coming on." She smiled wanly. "I guess that's what too much partying will do for you."

Laura laughed. "Yeah. You have to take it slower," she joked.

"I'm gonna go lie down now. Have a nice night."

"You, too." Laura watched as her sister shuffled out of the room. Poor kid, she thought. When she gets over this cold, she'll probably go back to her books and her collections. It was all a hell of a lot safer than being exposed to the world.

Ask Allison Heath, she thought grimly.

*** * ***

Buck and Wilma, the car, arrived promptly at eight. Laura went straight to the door without keeping him waiting. Tonight was not a night for games.

"Have you had dinner yet?" he asked, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"No," Laura replied. "Nobody here felt much like preparing a meal."

"How about going to Big Game Burger?" asked Buck.

Laura nodded without giving it much thought. She was hungry and Buck was paying. Not much more thought was necessary.

It was a short drive to Big Game Burger. Laura and Buck barely spoke.

"Two Big Game Burger combos, both with spear fries and Diet Cokes," Buck told the plastic game hunter at the drive-through window. A garbled female voice repeated their order. At one point, she seemed to announce that their meals would be "spindried," which made Buck and Laura giggle. The only clear phrase during her whole recitation was "Please pay at the next window."

Buck drove up and paid the cashier, who directed them to the next window to pick up their food. Two bags were thrust out at them — by Rayne Wilcox.

Buck greeted Rayne enthusiastically. Laura managed a smile, but her greeting lacked Buck's authenticity.

"Where are you two going tonight?" she asked, hungry for gossip as she handed a combo bag over to Buck.

"Just to a movie," Buck answered as he passed the bag to Laura. He shrugged as he took the second bag from Rayne. He was playing it cool.

Rayne turned her probing gaze on Laura. "Hunky for a skinny guy, isn't he?" Rayne winked at Laura as if the two were intimate friends.

Taking her cue from Buck, Laura also played it cool. She glanced up and down at Buck, then turned back to Rayne and replied, "I guess so, if you like that type."

A car horn sounded behind them. Leaning her head out of the drive-through window, Rayne shouted an obscenity at the impatient motorist, then turned back to Buck and Laura with a smile. "Guess I better get the line moving. Besides, when a Big Game Burger gets cold, it's pretty gross. Have a nice night, folks!"

Laura and Buck waved quick good nights as they pulled away. Rayne winked at Laura as they left. Rayne apparently approved of her dating Buck (not that she was, she reminded herself). Dating Buck would keep Laura away from Doug. She remembered Doug's warning to stay out of the jealous girl's way.

As Laura unwrapped her hamburger, she pondered Rayne's behavior. Her friendly act had clearly been a sham. And Rayne's choice words to the car behind them proved that when Rayne was angry, she didn't hold back.

"She's kind of weird, huh?" Buck said suddenly.

Laura paused, still holding up the hamburger, which she had not yet begun to eat, and turned to Buck.

"I thought you two hit it off well the other night," she said.

"Yeah," he said with his mouth full. "But she's kind of… intense."

Laura laughed. "You ain't just whistlin' Dixie!" Hearing the phrase for the second time, Buck laughed as well.

Laura opened her mouth, ready to bite into her burger. Then suddenly she spotted something brown and moving.

Her laughter turned to screams.

Chapter 8

Buck pulled the Datsun over to the side of the road with a screech. The hamburger in Laura's hands had by then flown against the windshield, where it stuck briefly and slid down, leaving a slimy trail of grease. Laura thrust her head out of her open window, choking and gagging.

"What happened?" Buck asked as the car recoiled from its sudden stop.

"A roach," Laura choked out. "In my burger." Luckily, she had not eaten much all day and was only suffering from dry heaves.

"A roach?" asked Buck, wide-eyed.

"It was alive, too," Laura told him, her heart still racing, but starting to calm down. Then she chuckled bitterly. "I guess Rayne got me."

"Rayne? You mean you think she put a roach in your burger?"

"Of course. She blames me for her breakup with Doug. He told me to watch out for her." Sorting it out helped Laura's breathing return to normal. "She caught me off guard. Got me good, too." Suddenly she started laughing. Compared to all the truly serious things that had happened recently, a roach in a burger somehow seemed funny.

Buck didn't think it funny at all. He pulled the car into traffic suddenly, tires screeching. Making a dangerous U-turn, he headed back toward the Big Game Burger.

"What are you doing?"

"We're going back to straighten out a certain person," Buck said, livid.

"No. It's okay, Buck. It was just a little prank." Murder was in Buck's eyes. Laura didn't like it. And suddenly those eyes were on her.

"So you're going to let yourself be bullied again?" His eyes narrowed to threatening slits.

At first Laura didn't answer. Then she gathered herself and said calmly, "No, I'm not letting myself get bullied." It was all she could do to return Buck's stare. Luckily, he had to turn away to watch the road. "Not by Rayne and certainly not by you. Now, let's just get to the movie, okay? I'll deal with Rayne later."

Buck turned back to her once more. He looked ready to argue, but for once, held his tongue.

"Okay." But obviously he wasn't happy about turning the other cheek. At the next light, he made a legal U-turn and they continued on their way to the movie theater.

"You have quite a temper, don't you?" Laura ventured timidly. Instead of roaring at her, Buck laughed.

"You ain't whistlin' Dixie," he responded. "I'm like my dad. But you manage to keep me in line. Mom never could keep Dad in line like that."

"Keep you in line?" Laura asked, raising an eyebrow. "Hardly."

"Sure. Any other girl would have let me go back there and start trouble." He seemed to remember a particular instance. "Believe me, it's happened," he told her cryptically. "But not with you. That's another reason I like you. You shame me into behaving."

Buck was all smiles now, and Laura returned his smile. Hers was a little forced, but Buck didn't seem to notice. Luckily. As Buck was speaking, Laura had come to a decision that she hoped she would never have to voice. She would never become serious with Buck. He was too volatile. And she didn't want to be the catalyst responsible for his transformation. He was nice and all, but it was too much responsibility. What if it didn't work, and he ended up worse off than he had been initially? He might even blame her for his failure to change.

No. They could be friends, but nothing more. She hoped things would just turn out that way naturally.

"Penny for your thoughts," Buck asked after she had been quiet for some time.

"Just thinking about what movie I want to see," she replied casually.

"Anything you want," he said as he pulled into the parking lot. "As long as it's not a major chick-flick."

Laura was glad of this, at least. She didn't need a romantic movie, in light of the decision she had just made. Ultimately they decided on an action movie with a romantic subplot. It was all harmless, and a lot of fun, so that by the time the movie was over, Laura was relaxed again.

"Every time I think they can't have more or bigger explosions during a movie," she giggled, "I see one with more and bigger."

"I know," laughed Buck. "Pretty soon the only thing left to show will be the Big Bang."

Laura found that comment so entertaining, she almost didn't notice when Buck casually slipped his arm around her shoulders on the way out of

the theater. At his touch, she stiffened slightly and pulled away, hoping he would think she was just being playful. His hand slid down her arm. Soon his fingers were locked in hers, gently but firmly, and he would not let go. She stopped moving, their arms a bridge between them. Laura glanced down nervously at their joined hands, then up at Buck. He was looking intensely at her.

"Buck, I…" she began falteringly, before he cut her off.

"Look, I know you think I'm a dork right now," he said quietly. "But I like you a lot. And I think one day you're going to like me. I just have to do the right things."

"Maybe, but…"

"Let me finish," Buck insisted. "This is the last time you're going to hear this from me. The next time you hear these words, they'll be coming from your mouth, and you'll be talking to me." Laura found his tone creepy, but something about it held her transfixed. "I'm yours, if you want me. I'd do anything for you."

Buck stared right into Laura's eyes. She stared back, nearly hypnotized. Then Buck broke the spell with a bright smile.

"There," he said, releasing her hand. "I'm not going to be pushy about this. Next move is up to you. Until then — if ever — I'm your buddy. That okay with you?"

Laura shook off the effect of his words. They were enthralling, but it still wasn't right. He was not for her. But for now, if he could keep to his word, a friendship might work between them.

"It's a deal," she said, forcing a smile. Then she thrust out her hand. Buck shook it gladly. And when they were done, he let go, and side by side, they continued toward his car.

About twenty paces away, Buck stopped short.

"Oh no," he muttered under his breath, staring ahead.

"What?"

Without answering her, Buck sprinted ahead. When Laura caught up, he was circling Wilma, looking down. She saw what he was looking at and gasped.

All four of his tires were flat.

"Well, it looks like I'm finally being officially welcomed to town," Buck said bitterly as he kneeled beside his car. Laura knelt down beside him.

"Have they been slashed?" she asked. Buck was probing the tires with his fingers.

"Don't think so," he replied cheerlessly. "But we'll find out when Triple-A gets here." He rose and started to walk away. Just as he did, something shiny under the Datsun caught Laura's eye. When Laura saw what it was, she gasped. Quickly she grabbed the small object, shoved it into her pocket, and stood back. Buck was walking away determinedly and had not seen her. Laura ran to catch up with him.

Buck was sullen, his hands thrust into his pockets, obviously trying to contain his anger. Laura felt for him. He had definitely been targeted. And based on the object Laura had just discovered, she knew who the culprit was. She toyed with the idea of telling Buck, but ultimately held back. She'd seen enough of Buck's temper to know that silence was the key for now.

Buck called Triple-A, and by the time they arrived and had reinflated his tires, Buck and Laura could have seen another movie. Silence rode shotgun during the trip home. It wasn't until they pulled into Laura's driveway that Buck spoke.

"I hope I don't find out who did that," he said quietly as he turned off the engine. "Whoever it is better hope not, too."

"It wasn't that bad," Laura told him optimistically. "If they had been slashed, that would have been really bad."

It was the wrong thing to say.

"It's one thing for *you* to sit back and let people trash you," he practically roared at her. "But I'm not gonna take it. I'd fight your battles if you'd let me. But I'm not gonna run away from my battles for you."

Laura was pressed against her door in fear. "Okay, okay," she said quickly. "I'm not telling you what to do."

"Good," he said ominously. Then his eyes widened as if he had come to a sudden realization. He took a deep breath and got ahold of himself. "I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I'm really angry tonight. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"It's okay," Laura said. She was lying, but they were the words that would get her into her house in one piece.

With the crisis over, Laura thanked Buck for the fun evening. Thankfully, a good night kiss wasn't on Buck's agenda. He gave her a strained smile, and a wave as he backed Wilma out of her driveway.

* * *

It was now after midnight and the house was dead silent. Laura knew Shelby and her mom must both be asleep. Laura headed straight for the phone and dialed a number. It rang twice and was answered by a familiar voice.

"It's me," she whispered into the receiver.

"I thought you'd call sooner or later," boasted Chester on the other end of the line. She could just see his smug face. "So I got sooner. Good girl."

"What's your problem!" she nearly yelled, infuriated. "You leave me alone."

"You didn't tell him, did you?" he asked, already knowing the answer — and enjoying it immensely.

"No," she said, now almost regretting that she hadn't shown Buck the class ring she found under his car. It was Chester's. She had recognized it instantly — it was the same one he had given to her when they had started going out. And the same one she had thrown into the deep end of the pool when she broke up with him.

"You can keep it if you want," Chester said. "Then we'll be going steady and can live happily ever after. If you want Bucky boy to live at all."

"What are you saying?" Laura asked, her voice quivering. She was beginning to wonder if the accident *had* caused Chester brain damage.

"Let's just say," Chester postulated, "that next time, it may not be his tires that'll have the air let out of 'em."

Laura couldn't take it anymore. "Why are you being like this?" she cried in full voice. "Do I mean that much to you? If I did, you'd let me be. Or are you just upset about Allison? I could understand that."

Chester snorted derisively. "Allison? You and I both know she got what she deserved."

Laura nearly dropped the phone in shock. "You need help, Chester."

"Uh-uh. I only need what I want. It's you that I want and you that I need."

Then the line went dead. Chester had hung up. Laura fled to her bedroom, making sure each window was latched shut and her door was locked. When she finally attempted sleep, it did not come easily. Every time her eyes fell shut, the echo of Chester's ominous words made them snap open again.

What was happening with Chester? He sounded so… lethal. Laura remembered that the police questioned him regarding Allison's death. After tonight's conversation, Laura took no comfort in the fact that Chester had not been arrested or charged. She checked the door and every window latch again. All locked.

But Laura still did not feel safe.

Chapter 9

The next morning, Laura awoke, surprised to find she had slept at all. Chester had frightened her, and she had still not shaken the menace of his words. Pulling on a robe, she went to Shelby's room and knocked on the door. Shelby was awake, sitting up in bed, reading.

"How are you feeling?" Laura asked as she entered. Shelby just shrugged.

"So-so," she sighed. "How was your date with Buck?"

"It wasn't boring," Laura began. "That's for sure." She related the events of the evening, from Rayne and the burger-bug incident, to Buck's vow to avenge his tires, to Chester's maniacal behavior.

"I hope you enjoyed the movie, at least," Shelby deadpanned.

"Stop it!" cried Laura, giggling nonetheless. "I'm worried. On top of all this, Doug says he has to talk to me. About what, I don't know, but by the sound of it, it's important and probably not good. And I still have to put on a happy face when I go looking for work, though I have applications just about everywhere by now, so I'm not quite sure what I'm going to do next."

"I know a place at the mall that's got an opening," Shelby said with an evil little grin on her face.

"That's not funny! I already got that from Buck yesterday." Now she was angry. It wasn't like Shelby to joke in such poor taste. Shelby immediately said she was sorry, and Laura easily forgave her. "I guess it's follow-up visit day," she sighed. "Rest up," she told Shelby as she rose to leave. "And wish me luck."

*** * ***

This day of job hunting was no less disappointing than all the others. None of the businesses to which Laura had previously applied had any job openings. Except, of course, Fair Warning. By midday, Laura was so frustrated, she actually found herself driving to the mall to apply for the position left empty due to Allison's murder. Unfortunately the store was closed due to the murder investigation.

Standing at the glass partition that closed Fair Warning off from the mall, Laura stared into the empty store. She found the three-way mirror in front of which, according to the papers, Allison had been hanged. On the right wing of the mirror, Laura could see dark smears. Pressing her face against the partition, she could tell the smears were brown or dark red.

Dried blood.

Laura pulled herself away from Fair Warning. She did not want to see any blood, let alone the blood of a murder victim she knew. Had known, to be more precise. She felt ghoulish, knowing she had been ready to take advantage of another person's death that way.

Shame drove Laura home, where she found a note from Shelby. It read:

Laura:

Feeling lots better. Thought I'd get some air.

Phone messages: Buck called a couple times from the hospital. He said call him ASAP. Doug called once, but said you won't be able to reach him until later because he's working at the Appleby mansion. So he'll call you back. Another round of hang-ups, as well. What's up with that, I wonder?

Hope the day went well for you, and I'll see you around dinner.

Shel

Laura put down the note, glad that her sister was feeling better. The rest of the note, however, had brought her down. Way down. Buck had called. She dreaded the day when he might find out who had vandalized his car. And if he ever found out that Laura had known it was Chester to begin with, he would feel betrayed. Laura was afraid of what both boys would do — to each other, and to her — if she ever told Buck the truth.

Then there was Doug. He had something on his mind and she was certain it was bad news. She couldn't take any more bad news right now. On the other hand, maybe he could help her figure out what to do about Buck and Chester. That buoyed Laura's spirits a bit. If he could help, then it would be easier for her to deal with whatever Doug was worried about. She

didn't like trading bad news for bad news, but it was better than letting the same old bad stuff just fester.

Echoing Shelby's words, Laura wondered what *was* up with all those answering machine hang-ups. For her money, she guessed that it was Chester calling to harass her. Laura hoped he would stop trying. She didn't want to call the police, but after last night, especially with Chester's comment about Allison deserving to die, it might soon be her only recourse.

Laura shuddered. The phone rang.

"I've been trying to reach you all day!" came Buck's frantic voice. "Where have you been?"

"I just got in," she told him. "What's wrong?"

"Got some news about your friend Chester today," he told her.

"What?" Laura's blood froze. Had he found out about Chester and the tires? She braced herself for his anger.

"You know when the police brought him in the other day?" Buck asked, sounding excited. "I found out they gave him a blood test."

"Why would they do that?"

"To see if his blood type matched that of some blood they found at the scene."

Laura remembered the dark smears on the mirror. A small tremor traveled up her spine. "Wouldn't that blood be Allison's?"

"The thing is, Allison was hanged, not stabbed or anything. She didn't bleed at all. So it must be the killer's blood."

Frightened of the answer, she asked, "So was Chester a match?"

"I don't know," he said. "But they *did* let him go." Buck was obviously disappointed he could not pin blame on his nemesis. "But there are two weird rumors going around.

"One is that a message was written in the blood they found. What the message was hasn't come out yet. The other isn't really a rumor, but an odd item. Remember Warner Holbert? The guy from the accident?"

"Yes. Did they ever find him?" Laura had completely forgotten about the headhunter's disappearance.

"No, he's still missing. But they've pulled records on his blood type as well."

That certainly was odd. "What could he possibly have to do with Allison?"

"Don't know that either. But the hospital is buzzing from all this, and I had to tell someone. You were the only one I could think of to call.

That reminded Laura of a question she had been meaning to ask. "What do your old friends think of all the excitement here in Springwood?"

Laura could almost hear Buck raise his walls of defense. "What old friends?" he asked warily.

"Where you used to live."

"Oh, I don't have many old friends," he said, almost daring Laura to ask about — to pry into — his old life. But Laura dropped the challenge. After a moment of awkward silence, Buck asked, "By the way, speaking of old friends, if you knew who had let the air out of my tires, you'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

Laura tensed. The jig was up. Or maybe he was just trying to trap her. Hoping she had not paused too long, she said, "No one I know would do something like that." Then, to keep it from being a complete lie, added, "None of my *friends*, at least."

Buck seemed to weigh her statement carefully before responding. "That's what I mean. If it *was* one of your friends, would you protect him?"

Him? So he did suspect someone in particular. And he suspected her of shielding that someone. She still thought her lying would save all of them a lot of grief.

"It's Doug, isn't it?" Buck said suddenly.

Laura's jaw dropped open, though Buck couldn't see it. She spoke through her shock. "No way! That is completely not the way Doug is."

"Are you sure about that? I've heard some things…" He let his voice trail off meaningfully, but Laura could only laugh indignantly.

"Right. Like what? And from whom? Chester?" She almost told Buck at that moment who had really sabotaged his car. But his wild accusation was so infuriating, she resolved that if Buck wanted to know who was responsible, he'd have to find out for himself. "Listen, Buck, Doug is one of the nicest guys I know. And one of my few *real* friends." She emphasized «real» hoping to bait him a little. Laura wanted Buck to know that he couldn't just waltz into town and presume to be that important to her. Buck didn't take the bait, however.

"Okay, okay," he said. "I may be new here, but I read people pretty well. This doesn't necessarily mean he was involved last night, but I don't think Doug is quite who you think."

"That's right, you *are* new here," she retorted.

"Okay, okay. Whatever you say. I'm just looking out for you."

Laura just rolled her eyes. Buck was totally off base now. And as far as she was concerned, it was past the ninth inning and the stands were empty. The game was over.

"I have to go now," she told Buck, for once not trying to conceal her displeasure.

"I really blew it, didn't I?" he said quietly.

"You ain't just whistlin' Dixie," she said humorlessly and hung up.

As Laura expected, the phone rang again mere seconds after she had hung up. The first few times, whoever was calling — Buck, presumably — hung up as soon as the answering machine picked up. Sure enough, Buck finally left a message.

"I don't know if you're listening to this or you've gone out," he said in a humble voice. "But I'm sorry I upset you. It's difficult enough to make friends in a new place without trampling all over their feelings. I guess I'm the proverbial bull in the china shop, in that sense. But I hope you understand how I feel. Besides you and your sister, no one else has been too friendly to me. And then to be attacked like that last night…" His voice had started to become tinged with sadness. Suddenly he stopped, took a deep breath, and spoke more forcefully. "Sorry, I was starting to whine. Anyway, bottom line is, I value you as a friend. I've worked hard to get to this point, and I'll work even harder to get you back. You say jump, I'll ask how high. Until then, I'll improvise. Call me when you're not mad." He seemed about to go on, but then just said good-bye and hung up.

Laura immediately erased the message. His plea was impassioned, and even sounded sincere, but it deserved no immediate response. Buck was too mercurial, always acting or talking before thinking, then justifying his questionable actions. It would be interesting to see what he'd say after a few days of silence. How would he react if his standard line was rebuffed?

What tune would he be whistling then?

*** * ***

By dinnertime, Shelby had still not returned home. This worried Laura. She had no idea where her sister was, or with whom. Normally Shelby

included where she was going — usually the library or the hobby shop — in her note. Laura found herself looking out the front window, watching for her.

So when the phone rang, Laura pounced on it like a leopard.

"Shelby?"

"Nope. Doug."

Laura exhaled in a low whistle. Where was Shelby?

"Is something wrong?" asked Doug.

"Oh, not really," Laura replied, feeling a little silly. "Shelby went out this afternoon and hasn't come home yet."

After a pause, Doug told her, "She's fine, I bet." But he didn't sound too convincing.

"You're no help."

"Sorry," he said quickly. Then his voice brightened measurably, if somewhat artificially. "I'm sure Shelby's all right. But I didn't call about her, I called about you. You haven't had dinner yet, have you?"

"No. I'm waiting for Shelby."

This time Doug seemed truly cheered. "Great. Come out to dinner with me tonight. So we can talk."

"I can't just up and leave." Laura glanced out the window once more. The street was still empty.

"Sure you can. Shelby did. And if she did, she's saying she can take care of herself, which means she can worry about dinner herself tonight."

"I don't know…"

"Unless you have other plans," Doug said, trying to sound nonchalant — and utterly failing. Laura knew what he meant. Other plans with Buck. Well, *that* sure wasn't the case.

"You're right. Shelby can deal."

Doug was elated at her decision, and nearly hung up on her in his excitement to pick her up.

"I'll be right over!"

"No you won't," Laura told him promptly. "You have to give me an hour to get ready." Doug readily agreed and they hung up. Shelby would be proud of me, she thought. I'm making a boy wait. Of course, it's not like he's a potential beau or anything — it was Doug, after all — but it was always good to get in a little practice.

Still, Laura took only a half hour to get ready, and was glad when Doug showed up fifteen minutes early. In all that time, there had been no word from Shelby, but by then, Laura had accepted that her sister was capable of taking care of herself. And besides, she was probably just at the hobby shop and had simply neglected to mention that in her note. So Laura just added a small note of her own at the end of Shelby's.

Out to dinner with Doug. Be home later.

Laura

Laura didn't notice how nervous Doug was acting until they began rumbling down the street in his car. She also did not notice that they were being followed.

"Where to?" she asked. "Jaguar?" Then a horrible image of last evening's six-legged snack popped into her head. "Please let's not go to Big Game Burger." She didn't want to tell Doug what had happened. It might just sound like sour grapes to him.

"Nope. I got a surprise for you tonight." He then turned and gave her a perplexing smile.

She wondered silently what Doug was up to. He obviously wanted her to ask, but she felt too tired to play an active role in a guessing game.

Doug turned back to the road — which quickly led them through town.

After a few turns, they reached an almost rural section of town, where larger, older houses were separated by vast lawns and wooded areas. More and more often, the driveways were actually long dirt roads. It was down one of these dusty paths that Doug drove. Trees formed a thick canopy overhead, blocking out the sky. Dusk was approaching, and Laura suddenly felt as if they had driven into a cave.

"Uh, Doug," Laura gulped, "where are we going?"

With the same mysterious grin as before, Doug said, "We'll be there soon. It's a surprise."

The dirt and gravel path wove among the trees for what seemed like miles. Laura could not tell where they were. But she knew they were far from any restaurants. Or people, for that matter. Why was Doug acting so strangely? For no particular reason, Laura's paranoia returned.

Buck had said that Doug wasn't who she thought. What could Buck know? He was the stranger, not Doug.

The voices seemed to fight for space in her head. Why are you so nervous? they asked. You've been nervous since the accident. Allison's murder upset you even more. You remember there was a message written in blood, and it was written with the killer's blood.

And you noticed that Doug has a cut on his hand.

Laura gasped, and for the first time realized what she had seen when Doug came to pick her up. There was a bandage on his index finger.

The message had been written in the killer's blood.

They had kept driving out of town. They were miles away from civilization now.

"What's wrong?" Doug asked, noticing her silence.

"I have to get back home," was all she could think of in reply.

Doug frowned, then smiled. "You kidder. Like you'd let me bring you out all this way and then make me turn around." He chuckled, evidently amused by Laura's presumed joke. "Don't worry, we're almost there."

Laura could say nothing more. She stared at the gauze bandage wrapped around his finger. A spot of blood had soaked through.

The message had been written in the killer's blood.

Chapter 10

"What happened to your finger?" Laura asked timidly.

Doug lifted his hand into the air long enough to make a face at it. "Paper cut," he said simply, and gripped the steering wheel once more. Then a bright smile bloomed on his face. "Ah, here we are." Lifting his hand once more, he used the bandaged finger to point ahead of them. Laura had to tear her eyes away from the blood spot to see what he was pointing at.

Distracted by the bandage, Laura hadn't noticed that the road had become paved. The drive was now smooth. Suddenly the trees gave way to a giant field of grass containing many gentle hills. But this wasn't just a field. It was a lawn — the front lawn to the biggest house Laura had ever seen.

"The Appleby mansion," Doug announced proudly.

Laura gasped, this time in awe rather than fear. The Appleby mansion was huge and magnificent, a smalltown Versaille. And as they approached, the mansion seemed impossibly to grow larger still. Only the scaffolding lent reality to what otherwise seemed to be a grand movie facade.

Doug was beside himself with pride that his surprise seemed to be working.

"Thought you'd like it." He beamed. "It's being renovated, as you can see. But it's still magnificent, isn't it?"

"Wow," was all that Laura could come up with. "I've seen pictures, and you've told me about it, but…"

"Yeah, I know. I work here three days a week painting, and I'm still pretty impressed by it." He pulled the car into an area of muddy, trampled grass that seemed to serve as a makeshift work-crew parking lot during the day.

"How's the work going?" Laura asked as she pushed opened her door and got out. Her eyes never left the incredible building before her.

"We should be done very soon. It's supposed to be occupied by October." Doug was leading her to a bank of scaffolding on the north end of the house.

"Why are they waiting so long to move in if you'll be done so much earlier?"

Doug shook his head and shrugged. "Apparently there will be major renovations to the inside, too. Not regular stuff, but I dunno." They arrived at the scaffolding. Doug looked up a ladder that stretched high into the air. "I got to go up there and check something. Can you hold on a sec?"

Laura said she'd wait, so Doug quickly climbed the ladder to the third level of scaffolding. He was pretty high up. Then he was gone, off the ladder and onto the platform above. Fluttering tarps hid him from view. Laura stepped back and strained to look, but could not see him. She thought she caught a glimpse of flickering light against the bottom of the fourth-level platform, but wasn't sure. Just then, Doug poked his face out from the scaffolding.

"Can you climb up here?" he called down. "I have to show you something."

Instead of shouting back, Laura just gave him a thumbs-up and started climbing. Heights did not bother her. But she climbed slowly. About halfway up, something inside reminded her that only minutes ago she had been afraid Doug was luring her to her doom. She paused during the climb.

Nah. This is Doug, she reminded herself, and resumed climbing.

What she saw when she reached the third level surprised her even more than the sight of the mansion had. Doug sat cross-legged several feet away. Candles burned in the middle of a red-checkered tablecloth spread on the platform before him. Set upon the cloth was a sumptuous picnic dinner. Doug looked up at her expectantly.

"Well, c'mon and sit down!" he said excitedly.

Laura, stunned, plopped down on the platform, shaking her head at what lay before her.

"This sure is a surprise," she told him. "Amazing!"

"This is only part of the surprise," he replied coyly. "Here's more." With that, he pointed out toward the forest in the distance. The sun was setting — spectacularly.

Laura looked from the sunset to the food to Doug. She was overwhelmed. Doug watched her response anxiously.

"This is wonderful," Laura nearly whispered. "How did you do all this?"

Doug was eager to explain. "A buddy on the paint crew helped me set this up. I knew no one was gonna be here tonight. And with the sunset, I just plain got lucky."

Laura looked at Doug. His eyes were afire. The evening's surprises had not ended. Doug produced a single red rose and offered it to her.

"I've been wanting to do this for quite some time," Doug told her, trapping her with his eyes. Falteringly he continued. "We've known each other for so long, but we've never dated. But I'm ready now. Will you go out with me?" He seemed to search through his mind, to make sure he had spoken all the words he had rehearsed a million times before.

Laura was speechless. Slowly she took the rose. Doug nervously tried to fill in the silence.

"We've always seemed to be out of sync before this. When I broke up with someone, you were dating someone else. Or vice versa." He gulped, panic setting in. The words came rushing out. "You have always been the one for me. Anyone else was just a placeholder for you. Now we're both free. The planets have aligned." He looked to the sky as if he indeed saw some cosmic convergence. Still Laura did not speak. Doug had run out of words, rehearsed or improvised. All he had left was, "Well…?"

Laura took a deep breath and blew Doug away with a word.

"No."

"What?" He looked almost apoplectic.

"I don't know," Laura said sadly. "Now's a bad time for this."

"Have I missed the boat again?" Doug asked. "Is Buck sailing?"

"No," Laura said emphatically. A flicker of hope lit in Doug's eyes, then died away when he saw that Buck's loss was not necessarily his gain. "I'm just very confused about a lot of things right now. I need you more as a friend, to help me through this."

"I can be a friend while I'm a boyfriend," Doug argued.

Laura shook her head. "You can't," she insisted. "At least not right now. I can't explain it." Her words were obviously wounding Doug, but Laura felt powerless to soothe him. He would only take comfort in what would be a lie. "I guess the planets haven't aligned after all," she said, hoping to lighten the mood.

Doug was crushed. He had risked crossing the line and had failed miserably. Now he seemed to be struggling to figure out how to cross back

— or if he would even be able. Sullenly he looked out toward the sun that had just disappeared below the tree line.

"I got this all for you," he nearly mumbled. "You can go ahead and eat if you want." Almost inaudibly he added, "I'm not hungry."

"Tell you what," Laura said, in another effort to raise Doug's spirits. "Let's wrap this stuff up and take it home. Maybe we'll be hungry by then. If Shelby's home, it can be the three of us. It'll be fun."

Without looking at Laura, Doug shook his head. "Shelby?" he asked in a low voice, filled with disgust. "I don't think so."

"What do you mean by that?"

Now Doug turned, his eyes no longer anxious, or excited, or hopeful. Even the sadness was gone, replaced by anger. "Her boyfriend probably bought her dinner," he said harshly.

"Boyfriend?" Now Doug was talking nonsense. "Shelby's never dated anyone. And if she had started, I'd know, believe me."

Doug was shaking his head quickly before she had even finished. "Well, she's started hiding things from you now."

"Impossible!"

"Do you remember the other day when you called and the phone didn't ring?" Laura nodded. "It didn't ring because you never called. I was already on the phone. You just didn't listen for a dial tone and started punching in numbers."

"You mean you were calling me?"

"Nope. I was already on the phone. With Shelby."

"She was asleep," Laura insisted. "She came down just as I got off the phone with you."

"Uh-uh. She was probably listening in on the conversation to make sure I wouldn't tell you about her and Chester."

Laura felt suddenly dizzy and grabbed a nearby railing for support. Doug had gone too far this time. Way too far.

"Look, you can be mad at me all you want," she shouted. "But you leave my sister out of this. She would never hide anything from me and she certainly wouldn't date Chester, behind my back or otherwise." Laura rose quickly to her feet, causing the scaffolding to sway. "That's really low, Doug, especially for you. Please take me home now." Moving faster than she should, Laura descended the ladder.

"It's true, I swear," Doug shouted after her as he followed. "It started in the hospital when they shared the room. You know how charming he can be, especially with looks like his." Laura made a beeline for the car, hoping Dough would shut up. "I saw them out a couple nights ago. When we were talking, when you thought you had called me, I was telling her that she should stay away from Chester."

"I'm not listening," Laura sang out as she reached the car. She pulled at the handle, but she had locked the door and had to wait for Doug to arrive with the keys. When he did, he wouldn't let her in until he had finished.

"I told Shelby that Chester was a creep, and was probably just using her to get revenge on you. When I said that, she went ballistic."

"Ballistic?" Laura sneered. Now she knew he was lying. Shelby rarely became excited, let alone went "ballistic."

"Yeah, she told me that if I spilled the beans, I'd be sorry." The anger had left Doug's voice. He seemed now only to be relating the story out of concern. But Laura still wasn't buying it.

"Shelby *threatened* you? Give me a break!" Then her eyes narrowed to dangerous little slits. "You let me in this car right now and take me home. And on the way, I don't want to hear any more of your lies. And after we get home, I don't want to hear or see you again."

"But, Laura…"

"Right now!" she commanded. Doug relented and opened the door. He started the engine without another word and drove off.

They drove past someone in the forest who had heard much of the argument. With a smile, the lurker returned to a car hidden just off the road, anxious to report what had just transpired.

*** * ***

Doug had barely stopped his car when Laura leaped out of it. She did not look back as she marched straight into her house and slammed the door behind her. Stopping just inside the front door, she waited to make sure Doug drove away. The engine rumbled off into the distance within a few seconds.

Fury still festering within her, Laura went straight to Shelby's room and walked right in. Usually she knocked, but tonight was a special case.

She had a lot on her mind. Unfortunately, Shelby's room was empty.

Her mother caught her at the bottom of the stairs.

"Is something wrong, Laura? I heard a lot of slamming and stomping around."

"Nothing really. I just have something important to tell Shelby." Laura peered past her mother into the living room. No one was there.

"Shelby's not home yet," her mother said mildly. "She called and said she was with some friends at the mall."

"The mall?" Laura asked, as if her mother had told her Shelby was hanging out at a slaughterhouse. "She never goes there."

"You didn't either, until around Shelby's age," Mrs. Walcutt pointed out with a motherly twinkle in her eyes. "Anyway, the mall should be closing, so she'll be home soon."

Laura decided to wait in her room for Shelby to come home. But an hour later, she had still not arrived. Laura felt frantic, but Mrs. Walcutt seemed unconcerned. "If she's with friends, they may have gone somewhere else."

"But what friends?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Walcutt admitted. Then she smiled. "But isn't it nice that she has some now?"

Laura returned to her room. Mrs. Walcutt went to bed. Still Shelby remained out with her "friends." The excitement of the evening caught up with her, and suddenly Laura found herself exhausted. She left her door open a crack and lay down on her bed, hoping to doze until Shelby returned.

*** * ***

The next thing Laura knew, it was morning. She had slept through the night and had not heard Shelby return… if she had returned, Laura thought in a sudden, paranoid flash.

Looking into her sister's room, she saw that Shelby was indeed deep asleep. That in itself was odd. Shelby was usually an early riser. Then Laura noticed the clothes draped over the chair facing Shelby's vanity. Some of Laura's clothes. Some of Laura's party clothes. Usually Shelby restricted her borrowing to oversized sweaters and jeans.

What she had borrowed last night was not mall wear.

Holding up the burgundy blouse — bought at Fair Warning only minutes after it had been taken from the box and hung on the display rack — Laura realized something. This blouse had been Chester's favorite. Laura almost woke Shelby up right at that moment, but held herself back. Silently she cursed Doug. As she left the room, she also reproached herself for allowing herself to doubt her sister because of what Doug said.

Yawning, she went to the front door to get the morning paper. She picked it up off the front porch, then stood there for a moment and scanned the headlines. Bombings, death, kidnapping, and deficits. She looked up from the headlines, still yawning.

What she saw in the street choked off her yawn. She dropped the paper and gasped.

Chapter 11

A painted white line ran a twisted course up part of the driveway, onto the sidewalk and to the front walk, where it continued on, ending in a large arrowhead pointing straight at the Walcutts' front door. In the street, at the end opposite the arrow, were painted the words:

Shelby and Chester sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G

Laura ran for the phone. Doug's sleep-clouded voice answered.

"You get over here and clean that out of the street before Shelby wakes up or I'm going to call the police."

"Wha…? What are you talking about?" Springs creaked. Doug was still in bed.

"You know damn well! You've got a half hour to get over here," she growled. "When my mom sees this, she'll flip!" Laura hung up before Doug could reply, then took the phone off the hook, knowing he'd probably try to call her back. Now he would be forced into action, or suffer the consequences.

Even after last night, Laura had been willing to sympathize with Doug and how he felt. She did care for him a lot, after all. That's why they had been such close friends. But he had gone almost beyond the point of no return.

Doug arrived less than thirty minutes later. His shock at what he saw was either genuine, or a well-rehearsed facsimile.

"I didn't do it, I swear," Doug told her in hushed tones. Shelby hadn't woken up yet. "Even if I did, which I didn't, I wouldn't be able to clean it up. That job will take heavy-duty solvents and scrubbers."

"You're the painter, so you would know," Laura remarked sarcastically.

"I didn't do it," Doug repeated more urgently. "Look, maybe I knew that telling you about Shelby and Chester would hurt you, but somebody had to tell you. You would have found out sooner or later." He gestured toward the painted message. "I didn't need to do this."

"Do what?" came a sleepy voice from behind Laura. It was Shelby. She had a fuzzy, sleepy smile on her face but became suddenly cold and alert when she saw Doug. "Oh," she said flatly.

"Ignore him," Laura told her. "You might as well look at what he did, though."

Doug started to protest his innocence again, but stopped as Shelby looked out at the street. Her eyes went wide. Then she did an odd thing.

Shelby laughed.

"Wow… I've never had a rumor spread about me." She sounded elated.

"Then it's not true?" Laura asked, glaring at Doug.

"Oh God no!" Shelby cackled as if the idea were physically repulsive and hysterical at the same time. "I find porcupines more cuddly than Chester."

"Stop with the games," Doug warned. "Tell the truth."

As quickly as that, Shelby's amusement disappeared.

"I don't know what your problem is, Doug. I thought we were friends." She looked out at the message on the street. "If that weren't so ridiculous, I'd say it was really, really mean. What did I ever do to you?"

Doug seemed genuinely flabbergasted by Shelby's response. "Cut the acting, Shelby. Tell Laura what's going on between you and Chester."

Shelby took a deep breath and said, "Okay." Turning to Laura, she looked her sister right in the eye. "What's going on between me and Chester is, well…" To Laura's horror, Shelby was having trouble saying whatever she wanted to say. A satisfied gleam appeared in Doug's eye. Finally Shelby got it out. "Actually, *nothing* is going on with me and Chester." With a smug smile, she turned back to Doug. "Satisfied?" Doug did not reply. To Laura she said, "You can ask Chester. Though the way he is these days, who knows what he'll say."

Angrily she turned to Doug. "Have you caught Chester's disease of rampant nastiness or something?"

"She's lying," Doug said, even though he was clearly giving up. "I'm sorry you don't believe me. I am your friend."

"And Shelby's my sister. Leave us alone," she ordered.

Doug slinked off to his car. As soon as he had driven away, Laura and Shelby walked into the house.

"I'm really sorry," Laura told her sister.

"It's okay, really," Shelby said brightly." I really like the idea of having rumors spread about me. It's fun!"

Laura searched her sister for any sign of discomfort. Shelby truly seemed to be enjoying the drama. Let her, then, Laura thought.

"But what's going on with everyone lately?" Laura wondered out loud.

"I know," Shelby said, suddenly becoming serious. "It's like a sickness, isn't it?"

Laura nodded. "Like an insidious virus that's crept into all of us. Mom will freak when she sees that," Laura suddenly said. "What will we do?"

Shelby thought for only a moment. "Don't worry. If I'm not upset, she won't get too upset."

Laura knew this was true. "But what about the mess?"

"She'll call the police, we'll tell her we have no idea who did it, the city will clean it up, and I'll have a juicy little rumor spreading through town about me!" Shelby clapped her hands together in glee.

"But we know who did it," Laura pointed out.

"Who, Doug? If he denied it to us, he'll deny it to the police, too," Shelby argued. "Besides, do you really want to get him into trouble that badly?"

Laura thought about it. Really, she didn't. He was being awful, but it would hopefully pass. And since Shelby wasn't concerned, Laura didn't feel so compelled to pursue it. She agreed halfheartedly to Shelby's plan.

And for the first time in a long time, everything happened as predicted: Their mother didn't get too upset, she called the police as a matter of record, and a crew was scheduled to clean up the paint that afternoon.

Before the crew arrived, however, Buck called. He was very upset.

"Someone threw paint, house paint, all over my car!" He was livid, as out of control as Laura had ever heard anybody. "I hate this place. We never should have moved here!"

"It's not like this, usually." Laura's words rang hollow, but she wanted to cheer him up if she could. In the past twenty-four hours, his warning about Doug had proven on target. "Insurance will cover it, won't it?" she asked hopefully.

"Yeah, but I still have to pay a deductible. And I can't afford that. I bet Chester's doing this to get back at me for beating him the other night." Then his voice turned savage. "He didn't learn, apparently. Well, believe me. I'll teach him."

"Hold on!" Laura told him. "Maybe it wasn't him."

"Who else would have it out for me?" Buck demanded.

"I don't know," Laura said quickly. "Maybe it was just a random thing. Your part of Elm Street's not the best neighborhood, you know."

"Maybe," Buck said with disbelief. "But if I find out if *was* Chester, he's going down. That's all I have to say."

Laura tried to keep her voice calm. If things kept up at this rate, the boys would end up killing each other.

"Are you working tomorrow?" she asked, seizing the opportunity to change the subject.

"Nope, got the day off, for whatever that's worth now."

"How about if Shelby and I pick you up and take you to the pool. It's supposed to be a hot one."

"Really?" The invitation astonished Buck. Then his voice turned suspicious. "Won't Chester be there?"

"Actually, I don't know," Laura told him. "He doesn't work every day. Besides, I'm not letting him stop me from doing things I enjoy."

She was putting up a brave front, but secretly Laura was worried. It would be her first time at the pool since Chester had fired her. She had only made the suggestion because it was summer, and the pool was a natural place to be whether she was working or not. But there had been so much trouble recently. Suddenly, going to the pool didn't seem like such a hot idea.

"We could go to the park instead," she offered hopefully.

"No, the pool's fine. If you can handle it, so can I." Inadvertently, she had impressed Buck.

Damn.

They made arrangements for the next day and hung up. She called Doug right after.

"Now what did I do?" Doug asked sullenly when he answered the phone.

"Don't give me that," Laura snapped. "Buck just told me about his car."

"Let me guess," Doug said in a dull voice. "More paint."

"Yeah, all over the place," Sarcastically she asked, "How'd you guess that, I wonder?"

This finally set Doug off. "Because I heard that some paint was stolen from the Appleby house last night. They called me because my buddy knew I was supposed to be there. At least *they* believed me when I said I didn't do it." His anger was tightly woven with a sense of disappointment. "I can get over you not wanting to date me, but it hurts that you think I would lie to

you. I should never have told you about Shelby and Chester. Maybe my timing wasn't the greatest. But hey, you're not the only one with problems."

"I never said…"

"Let me finish. I have big problems right now. I feel like some guy in a movie, framed for crimes he didn't commit. And you wanna talk about exes? Try dealing with Rayne, who won't leave me alone. She thinks I'm just going through a 'phase' and will come crawling back on my hands and knees any minute. The way I feel right now, if I came back to her, I'd be carrying a big ax."

"You don't mean that, Doug."

"Yeah, well, I'm a vandal, why not a murderer?" he said cryptically, and hung up. He didn't answer when Laura called back seconds later. Within the hour, Doug's mother answered the phone to say he had gone to work at the pool. Laura thanked her and hung up.

She was no longer angry at Doug.

Now she was worried.

* * *

That evening, Laura stayed home to watch a rented movie on video while Shelby went off with her "friends." It was great that Shelby was developing her own social life.

* * *

Long after Laura gave up waiting for Shelby to return home, over at the Big Game Burger, Rayne Wilcox was humming a pleasant little tune as she closed down the restaurant for the night.

Rayne was on cloud nine this particular evening. Everything was going along smoothly, way beyond her expectations. A deep rift was forming between Doug and Laura, and when he finally accepted that Laura was an impossible goal, he would come running back to her. And she only had herself to thank.

Well, Buck, too.

Cleaning up around the grill, Rayne noticed the fry cook's watch lying at the edge. She shook her head. That Billy. He'd forget his head if it weren't permanently attached. He'd be back for it, though. As usual, he'd sneak through the unlocked back door, retrieve what he'd forgotten, and leave without a word. It happened all the time. Bill was always so embarrassed about it.

Dork, Rayne thought.

Ah yes, Buck. Rayne had pegged him for an ally the first time she had laid eyes on him at the party. His possessiveness was obvious, even though he and Laura had just met. He had been very receptive to Rayne's warnings about Doug and Laura. And even more receptive to her plan to split the two apart. Rayne wanted to get her man, and Buck wanted Laura with equal passion.

It was Buck's willingness to do almost *anything* to get what he wanted that surprised — and pleased — Rayne. He had even caught the roach she had slipped into Laura's hamburger, presenting the bug to Rayne as if it were an offering to a goddess. On her orders, Buck had followed Laura and Doug to the Appleby mansion. Her suggestion that Buck trash his own car had initially been a joke. But Buck had later driven all the way back to the work site to retrieve the paint. Ruining his car, he argued, was so crazy that no one would suspect him.

Crazy.

The boy *must* be nuts, Rayne thought. Or nuts in love. Whatever the case, Rayne admired Buck's industriousness. Sure, she had slipped the roach in the burger, and left a few hang-ups on Laura's answering machine for effect, but Buck was doing the real work. If Doug weren't around, Buck would make a good pet boyfriend. I'll just continue to use him until I get what I want, Rayne thought. Then he's bye-bye. Hopefully he'll get what he wants at the same time, and all will be well. If not, that would be his problem.

Rayne hoped he never found out how she really felt.

The back door of the Big Game Burger opened and shut with a greasy squeak. Rayne barely looked up. Billy had returned for his watch.

Nearly finished closing up the restaurant, Rayne went to the fryer to perform her nightly ritual. She took a single frozen French fry and dropped it in the grease that had been deep-frying food all day. The oil was still hot and bubbled the moment the fry dropped into it. To Rayne, it looked like a

million tiny piranhas devouring the fry. Mesmerized, she stared into the boiling little pool, until the fry turned from white, to light brown, to dark brown, and finally became a blackened, crispy thing.

Rayne smiled.

Just then, a hand grasped her shoulder tightly and spun her around. Rayne shrieked.

"Jeez, you scared me!" she whined at the intruder. "What do you want?" She got no answer. The hand still grasped her shoulder tightly. She tried to shrug off the hand, which was now beginning to hurt. "Ow! What's your problem?"

"You," was the answer Rayne received. And it was the last word she ever heard.

In a blur of speed, the intruder spun Rayne back around. She was facing the deep fryer now. The intruder's other hand shot up and pushed against the back of her head. Rayne's face was being forced down — toward the hot grease. She struggled against the force that was pushing her closer and closer to the smelly, boiling oil. Her hands flailed helplessly. She was unable to scream. Even a foot away, her face began to burn.

The tip of her nose touched the oil and began to sizzle immediately. The pain was intense and concentrated on a small area. Now, suddenly, she was able to scream. But it was too late.

Rayne's entire head was suddenly plunged into the boiling grease. Her last sensation was of being stung in the face by a million, billion wasps.

The hand held Rayne in the grease until her struggling ceased. When she was let go, Rayne's body slumped backwards and onto the floor.

Her face had become a blackened, crispy thing.

Chapter 12

Correction.

Summer did not die *immediately* with Allison Heath. Instead, Allison's murder was but one spasm in the ultimate, painful death of the season. Rayne's murder was another, even more violent spasm.

Laura unfolded the front page of the newspaper she retrieved from the front porch. It blared:

HELP WANTED: DEATH FOUND

"Oh my God!" Laura cried when she read Rayne's name. She forgot about the weird headline and started reading, absorbing the hideous story sentence by ghastly sentence.

The phone rang. Her eyes still glued to the paper, she reached for the receiver.

"I guess this isn't the best day for the pool, huh?" Buck had seen the article as well.

"What?" Laura said, in a daze. "Oh. No it isn't, is it? I don't know what else to do, though. I need to be around people."

"We'll go, then," Buck agreed, and hung up. Transfixed as she read, Laura found herself listening to a dial tone before she hung up.

According to the article, Rayne's body — they didn't describe how she had died — was found by a fry cook around 2:00 a.m. when he returned to get a watch he had left behind. The police had held him as a suspect initially, but later released him.

Then came the real shock: The police had found, scrawled in blood on the counter above the victim, the words help wanted. Laura looked back at the headline and almost fainted. The article stated that the same two words had been written on the mirror beside Allison Heath's body at the mall, but the police had succeeded in keeping it out of the papers. Now everyone knew. Laura was breathless.

She ran upstairs to wake up Shelby.

Shelby was as mortified as Laura when she heard the news. Sitting up in bed, Laura noticed that she looked pale.

"I think that cold is coming back," Shelby said when she noticed her sister studying her. "I'm gonna bow out on the pool thing. But you should go. No use in both of us stewing in our own juices."

"You sure?" Laura would stay if her sister wanted her to.

"Go ahead. Summer's not over yet." Shelby smiled. "No matter what they say."

* * *

Buck's bright beach towel and colorful swim trunks were in stark contrast to his mood as he climbed in Laura's car. It took him a few moments to notice that Shelby was missing. After Laura told him she was sick, he lapsed back into silence.

"You seem worse than you were this morning, and you barely knew Rayne," Laura pointed out.

Buck shifted listlessly in the passenger seat. "Actually, she was the only other person who was nice to me."

Laura recalled how Rayne had seemed to adopt Buck at Doug's party. No wonder he was so blue.

"I called the hospital this morning," he said suddenly. "Apparently the blood used to write those words was Warner Holbert's."

"You mean, they still haven't found him?" Laura asked.

"No," Buck said. "It seems he's the prime suspect. But the police aren't saying anything to the press because they're afraid of being laughed out of town."

"Why?"

"Their theory is that Holbert got out of the hospital, was brain-damaged or something, and is going around killing kids responsible for the car accident."

"But it was his fault," Laura pointed out. "He had the heart attack that caused the wreck."

"I know, but he's brain-damaged now, or so the police think. And he writes 'Help Wanted' in his own blood because of his job."

"As a headhunter," Laura mused. "But if that's true, then we're in trouble. Us, Shelby, Doug — and Chester, too." The scenario seemed impossible. "It can't be. I'm sure the police don't really believe that. It's

ridiculous." Laura was suddenly aware she was trying to convince herself, not Buck. She was scared. Timidly she continued. "I don't believe it. You don't, do you, Buck?"

"Not at all," Buck answered. "But the police? They're searching the Thompson house."

"Why there?"

"If you were a crazed child killer, where would you hide out?"

*** * ***

By the time they arrived at the pool, Laura was convinced they were making a mistake. But at the same time, she felt like there was no turning back. As they walked across the parking lot, Laura made Buck promise to behave.

"If he's here," Laura said, "he probably won't cause trouble because he'll be working. But I don't want you to give him any excuses, okay?"

"I won't lift a finger," Buck promised. "Unless, of course, he starts something."

Laura looked him over carefully. "He better not. Same goes for you, too. Okay?"

"Deal!"

The poolside itself held two surprises. For one, Chester was nowhere to be seen. Even more surprising was Doug's presence. She had tried calling him earlier, but his line had been busy. Now he sat slouched at the top of his lifeguard chair.

"Now, *there's* your murderer," Buck said under his breath before he could stop himself. Laura looked at him sharply. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

But she wasn't angry. He had just reminded her of what Doug had said last night about Rayne. "It's all right. What makes you say that, though?"

"I told you. I have a sense about him."

"That hardly makes him a murderer."

"True," Buck conceded. "But I've been thinking about my car. Maybe it was him, not Chester. He hasn't been too friendly, and I bet it's because he sees me as a threat to his relationship with you." He waited for Laura to deny his words. She didn't. "As for the murders," he continued, "that cut on his finger sent up a big red flag in my brain."

Laura glanced quickly over to Doug. His finger was no longer bandaged. Doug saw her looking. His eyes were dead. Laura turned away. "I saw it, too," she told Buck.

"Let's just say I'm surprised the police haven't tested his blood yet."

Laura could say nothing, but she was thinking the same thing.

Then her thoughts were abruptly interrupted as Buck suddenly was jolted away toward the pool. He landed with a painful belly flop. Out of breath, he thrashed about in the water.

Laura glared at Chester who stood at the pool's edge, smug and laughing.

"Sorry about that," Chester called to Buck. "I guess I tripped and got thrown really off balance. I didn't mean to knock into you." He leaned over and reached for Buck's hand.

"Chester, don't…"

He ignored her.

"Give me your hand." Chester reached out farther — and missed Buck's flailing hand. Instead, he found Buck's head and pushed him down under the surface of the pool. "Ooops!" he cried facetiously, and reached out again. And dunked Buck again. Laura took hold of Chester's arm and tried to haul him away from the water's edge, but it was like trying to budge a boulder.

"Stop it!" she yelled.

After one last dunk, Chester stood up. "I was just trying to help," he said, with an evil grin on his face.

Buck finally found the edge of the pool and pulled himself to it. Holding himself up on his arms, Buck clung to the side, his breath heaving.

"You nearly drowned him!" Laura cried, and tried to help Buck out of the water.

"If I wanted to drown him, I would have," Chester hissed. Looking at Buck, he practically spat, "You came to the wrong place today, buddy. Coming here was like walking into the lion's den smeared with bacon fat."

Buck still hadn't recovered enough to reply. Satisfied, Chester disappeared into the pool administration building.

"That's it," Laura said, looking after him. "I'm going to get him fired. He can't do that."

"No!" Buck choked out finally. "Let me take care of it." Anger seeped from him like dense fog. "I've taken enough of his shit."

Laura didn't even try to contradict him this time. For once, she felt that however Buck decided to handle this was his business. Chester deserved to be put in his place once and for all.

"Let's go," Buck said. As they left, Laura caught a glimpse of Doug. His eyes seemed to register blank. If he had seen the altercation with Chester, he gave no sign of it. He looked like a zombie.

* * *

Laura and Buck decided to scuttle the rest of the day. Chester had ruined whatever good time they might have been able to have. When Laura dropped Buck off at home, she called him back to the car before he went inside. He leaned in the driver's side window much like he had clung to the side of the pool.

"What's up?" he asked, his mood only slightly lighter than since they'd left the pool.

Laura hemmed and hawed, but finally spoke. "There's something I never told you about the night we went to the movie."

"What?" A dark cloud seemed to hover over Buck.

"I found a ring under the car that night. Chester's class ring. I even called him and he admitted that he had messed up your tires." She paused. Buck waited for her to go on. "Anyway, he even dared me to tell you. But I didn't. And now I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked carefully.

"Because I didn't want there to be trouble. Trouble was exactly what Chester wanted. Now," she admitted, "I just don't care. Least of all about Chester." Laura braced herself for Buck's anger. Instead, he relaxed.

"Oh, well, that's okay. Doug or Chester — knowing for sure doesn't make that much of a difference to me, actually."

"So are you mad at me?"

"I guess I should be," he said. "But I'm not. Lucky you."

"Yeah, I feel lucky," she said, smiling.

Buck managed a smile of his own, but it seemed labored. "Let's try again tomorrow, okay?"

"Not the pool, right?"

"Not the pool," he echoed. "I wouldn't be caught dead there."

* * *

The rest of the day seemed to last forever. Shelby was still feeling poorly, and napped on and off during the day. Laura realized suddenly that she had no one to talk to. When the sun finally set, Laura anxiously awaited sleep. She wanted to escape today and hope for a better tomorrow. How pathetic, Laura thought. I'm acting like all I want is a day without tragedy. Could things get any worse?

Laura shuddered.

Lately, that seemed to be the wrong question to ask.

* * *

At midnight, large hands appeared on the top of the stone wall that surrounded much of the pool. Muscles flexed. Chester's muscles. He gave himself three pull-up reps before lifting himself to the top of the wall and over.

"Quit flexing and pull me up," said Chester's female companion on the other side of the wall. Obliging (not because he was obliging by nature, but because he was finished flexing), Chester lifted his date over the wall. She giggled to have his arms around her. She was so much smaller than he was, she was like a feather by comparison. Soon she was standing beside him.

Shelby Walcutt looked around the dark, empty pool area. A thrill rushed up her spine.

"You have a key. Why didn't we come in the front door?" she asked.

Chester laughed as if she were a clever little child, threw his arm around her, and they began to walk toward the pool building, which loomed like a large blank spot before them.

"Because, silly, anybody can come through the front door during regular hours. Coming over the wall is more exciting."

"I guess," Shelby told him, but she seemed playfully unconvinced. She giggled again. "Did you ever bring Laura here late at night?" she asked.

"Nope. She's a little straitlaced for pool-hopping."

"I bet," Shelby said in a voice Laura would not recognize. It was more adult, and more harsh. "She'd be *really* upset if she knew I was here now."

"Oh, who cares about her?" Chester purred. Girls liked it when he purred. Shelby was different, though. At his comment she whirled in his arms.

"I do," she said sharply. "I don't want her to get hurt, which is why she can't know what's going on." Chester recoiled slightly, then Shelby wrapped his arms around her waist again like he was a sweater. "That doesn't mean I don't want to have fun," she purred, even more effectively that he had. "I can't believe how boring I've been my whole life."

"Personally," Chester said, lifting her up off her feet, "I think you're cured."

Shelby shrieked, then covered her mouth out of embarrassment.

"Ready for a swim?" Chester asked.

"Not yet," Shelby told him. "You go ahead, though."

Chester instantly stripped to the swim trunks he had worn under his cutoffs. In the dim light of the stars and the crescent moon, Chester could barely see Shelby. Too bad, he thought. That means she can barely see me.

Her loss.

Slipping easily into the water (none of this toe-testing malarkey for him), Chester swam quickly to the deep end of the pool. The question of his future came to mind. Would it be sports? Acting? Actually, modeling appealed to him. It seemed to be the easiest money for the least effort. Just stand there and look beautiful. He could handle that.

In the middle of his second lap, Chester remembered Shelby. More accurately, he remembered he was with someone, and Shelby's name came to mind a few seconds later. He often became distracted when he got to thinking about himself. No one else existed.

He swam to the edge of the pool.

"Hey! You coming in or what?" he whispered hoarsely to Shelby, who sat on the concrete nearby watching him swim. With his left hand, he splashed some water in her direction. She scooted back, giggling.

"Stop that! I'll be in."

"Okay, just don't make me wait too long," Chester told her as he fell backward into the water again and resumed swimming laps. Normally he wouldn't even care if the girl he was with joined him. He was happy to give his date something to watch. But Shelby was a special case. He wanted to get his revenge on Laura for dumping him.

Chester suspected that when Laura found out he had been seeing Shelby on the sly, there would be big fireworks. Fireworks between him and Laura. And big, big fireworks between Laura and Shelby. Shelby, in her naïveté and eagerness to turn over a new leaf, didn't realize what she was doing.

Which was just how Chester liked it.

He knew that Doug had already tried, and failed, to inform Laura about what was going on. It was her utter disbelief that proved to Chester how effective his revenge would be. Even the painted message in the street, which he initially thought would give away the game too soon, had worked in his favor. Buck, that wacko, was no doubt behind that. Doug would never pull such a stunt; even Chester knew that. And if Laura was thinking clearly, she would realize that as well. No, it had to have been Buck. That's why he'd gone easy on Buck today at the pool. He had planned worse. But the guy had unknowingly helped him out. So Chester had felt charitable.

But he felt no such charity toward Laura. He was almost ready to pull out his trump card: Shelby. So far, they had been very careful to conceal their activities. But Shelby was acting so giddy now with the excitement of it all, she wouldn't notice if Chester arranged a small slip.

A slip that would reveal their relationship to Laura.

As soon as Shelby dipped even one toe in the water, that would be the sign.

"Come on," he called out suddenly from the middle of the pool. "I'm lonely in here."

He looked out toward the black blot of the administration building. Shelby had been sitting there only minutes ago.

Now she was gone.

Chester swam to the edge of the pool. He called out, scanning the entire pool area. His eyes had by now adjusted to the darkness, but Shelby was nowhere in sight.

"Hey, Shel!" he shouted, using his full voice. No response. "Come on, I'm not in the mood for this." He used the voice that usually brought an end to nonsense. Still Shelby did not appear. Nor did she giggle to indicate he should come find her. That would have been all right by Chester.

But nothing.

The only sounds were the gentle slosh of the water against the sides of the pool, a soft wind, and street sounds from the city beyond the concrete

walls.

Suddenly Chester was worried. Not for Shelby's safety. But what would happen to him if something had happened to her? Now, that would be the monkiest of wrenches in his plans.

He started to pull himself out of the pool. That was when a dark shape detached itself from the administration building and moved toward him. Chester didn't see anything until it was almost upon him.

By then it was too late.

Two strong hands clamped onto Chester's shoulders and pushed him firmly backward. Instinctively Chester used his legs to shove himself out and away from his attacker. But the grip on his shoulders was too strong. The hands did not let go. The attacker wasn't even pulled into the water. Chester only succeeding in pulling muscles in both his legs.

The next moment, Chester's head was underwater. He struggled and thrashed, but to no avail. The arms that held him down were solid as granite and just as impervious to his blows. And unlike earlier when he had dunked Buck, Chester was not being allowed back up to the surface.

Finally it dawned on Chester that he was about to drown.

Impossible! his mind shouted. I have a life of beaches, babes, and bodybuilding to live. Standing around, looking good, and getting paid for it. It was the American dream. Where'd this nightmare come from?

All these thoughts and more swam upstream desperately against an increasingly strong current of despair.

Then the pain began. His chest was clenched in a vise as strong as the hands on his shoulders. These were his lungs crying out for air, and his diaphragm contracting to force him to breathe. Chester felt like a tube of toothpaste being squeezed from the bottom.

But it wasn't toothpaste that oozed out of him.

It was his life.

Chapter 13

Laura was roughly awakened just after three A.M. As her mother threw a robe at her and dragged her into the car, Laura could barely comprehend what was being said.

Chester had been murdered.

Shelby in the hospital after some sort of seizure.

The murderer also found dead at the scene.

It was only at the hospital that the story was told more fully. But it still made no sense.

A police officer told Laura and her mother that they answered a complaint about pool jumpers at the municipal pool during the night. "When we arrived on the premises, we heard nothing and almost left, figuring that if there had been any trespassers, they had been scared off. Then, just by chance, one of the other officers looked in and saw Chester floating facedown in the middle of the pool.

"Then," the officer continued, "we spotted another body near the edge of the pool. This turned out to be Warner Holbert. Beside his body, scrawled in his own blood, were the words 'Help Wanted.' "

Laura gasped. Her mother sat down. "But what about Shelby?" Laura stammered.

"We found her unconscious, lying near the turnstiles of the locker room. At first we thought she was dead. Her face was covered with blood. Her breathing was shallow, but she was alive."

The doctor walked in and took it from there.

"Shelby seems to have suffered a massive seizure, due to a previously undiscovered injury presumably sustained in her recent car accident. Had she complained of feeling unwell lately?" the doctor asked, but he continued before Laura could answer. "Anyway, the episode caused a nosebleed, which explains the blood."

The police officer wrapped up the bizarre tale. "As best as we can determine, Shelby must have had her seizure and collapsed without Chester ever knowing about it and before the arrival of the killer. She was hidden well enough that the killer never saw her. Otherwise, she surely would have been killed as well."

"As it is," the doctor said gravely, "she is in a coma. But in stable condition otherwise. We need to give her some time."

Laura was in shock and could not speak. Somehow, her mother found the strength to ask more questions. The main mystery turned out to be how Warner Holbert had died.

"Heart attack, most likely," the doctor said hesitantly, after exchanging a strange glance with the police officer. "We haven't had much time to figure it out, you understand. Our first priority was your daughter, then the Carter boy. We'll have the rest of the puzzle sorted out by late morning, I expect." But he didn't appear too confident.

With that, the doctor and the police officer escorted both Walcutt women to Shelby's room. Laura almost cried when she saw her sister. She was hooked up to many more machines than she had been the last time. And her face seemed agonized rather than peaceful. Dried blood caked the inside of her nostrils.

*** * ***

On the way home, both women cried. Laura's tears flowed for her sister's condition, but for other reasons as well. Self-pity was a big one. Doug was another. He had been telling the truth all along. Shelby *had* been seeing Chester behind Laura's back. Why else would Shelby have been at the pool at that time of night? Shelby had lied. Repeatedly. And Doug had been punished for it. Laura had even gone so far as to suspect him of murder.

How would he ever forgive her?

Laura didn't even attempt to sleep when she returned home. She made coffee and read as the minutes crawled by. As soon as she could, she would go back to the hospital. While she kept a vigil for Shelby, she would figure out what to say to Doug. It would take more than a simple apology to make up for her behavior.

Somehow, Laura's mother forced herself to go to work the next morning, taking some comfort in knowing that Laura would be at the hospital.

Laura arrived at the hospital the minute visiting hours began. She held her sister's hand, praying for her to wake up. At least, she thought, this

seemed to mark the end of the epidemic of violence that had been plaguing them. With Warner Holbert found, identified as the murderer, and too dead to be killing anyone else, the chain of death seemed to be broken. Still, there were wounds to be healed. If she came out of this, Shelby would have to justify the deceitful behavior that had nearly gotten her killed. And Laura had a lot to make up to Doug.

But by the time noon rolled around, Shelby's eyes remained closed, and Laura had come no closer to figuring out how to approach Doug.

The door opened, and Buck entered.

"You okay?" he whispered, kneeling next to Laura. She could only shrug sadly. "Come out to the hall with me," Buck urged her. "I have to tell you something."

When Laura's eyes lit with panic, Buck assured her that they wouldn't go far or be out of the room for long. Finally she followed him out the door.

"More news on the pipeline that I think you should know," he told her. "This isn't even going to be in the paper until the police can find a plausible story to replace it with." He took a deep breath before he explained. "They did an autopsy on Warner Holbert. He's been dead for several days. He couldn't have killed anyone."

"But he was found at the pool this morning," Laura pointed out. "And what about his blood at the murder scene?"

"The police are working on a pretty gruesome theory, from what I've heard." He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, as if he had eaten something foul. His eyes darted around the corridor, to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "They think Holbert had a heart attack and died the night he disappeared from the hospital. They think someone — the real murderer — took his body from the hospital and hid it while the murders were taking place."

"But why in the world…?" Laura stammered. "What about his blood?"

"You don't want to know," Buck said. But Laura insisted she did. "They think the murderer took a bottle of blood with him and used it to implicate Holbert. Up until now, it's worked."

"Then why dump the body now?"

"Whoever it was probably didn't have a large enough refrigerator. The body was getting pretty rank, so the real killer decided to get rid of it before the stink gave him away."

Laura was flabbergasted by the theory. It was morbid. Sickening. But it made sense. There was only one thing missing.

"Why?" she asked. "Why would anyone do this?"

"I don't really know," Buck told her. "Maybe there is no reason." He shrugged, unable — or unwilling — to say more.

Just then, Doug appeared, running down the hall toward them.

"I just heard," he said breathlessly as he reached them. Laura didn't resist as he swept her into a rocking embrace. She immediately burst into tears. His compassion was unexpected — and undeserved. "It's all right," he whispered into her ear. The show of affection visibly unnerved Buck.

"Wha… What are you doing here?" Buck sputtered.

Doug released Laura but kept his arm around her shoulders. To her it seemed perfectly natural.

"Laura and Shelby are my friends," Doug told him, surprised at the question. "Why else?"

"So you don't hate me?" Laura asked him tearfully.

Doug laughed and shook his head. "Of course not!"

"Hey!" Buck interrupted manically. "You can't just barge in here." To Laura he pleaded, "Remember what he did to you. And me, too, unless there were two paint vandals that day."

"What's your problem?" Doug asked, driven quickly to the near-breaking point.

"Calm down, Buck," Laura cautioned. "Doug didn't do anything. He didn't lie about Chester and Shelby, and he would never attack me."

"What about me?" Buck asked angrily. "He's been wanting me out of the picture since the night of his party."

"What are you talking about?" Laura was astounded.

"He'd never get anywhere with you with me around, and he knew it." Buck started to pace as if he were a trial lawyer delivering a final summation. "So he's been trying to drive me away."

"You're nuts!" Doug shouted. "If anything, someone's been trying to drive me and Laura apart. I thought it was Chester." He lowered his voice and stared straight at Buck. "I'm beginning to change my mind."

Buck stopped pacing and met Doug's stare. Laura looked from one to the other. Impending violence was thick in the air.

"He's the crazy one, Laura," Buck growled. "Remember the cut on his finger? Bet he's got some burns from cooking oil, too. You like your fries

extra crispy, or just your ex-girlfriends?"

Without warning, Doug swung at Buck. Laughing, Buck easily dodged the blow and hammered Doug in the stomach. Doug doubled over and nearly collapsed. Buck was about to deliver another blow, but Laura stepped between them.

"Stop it!" she cried.

"Did you see that?" Buck asked breathlessly, his adrenaline pumping. "He attacked me."

"You baited him, Buck." Laura was furious. She wrapped her arms around Doug, who was gasping for breath.

Then it came to her. She realized what had seemed odd at the pool yesterday.

"How did you know about the cut on Doug's finger?" she asked warily.

Buck was still pumped up and didn't see the trap. "At the pool. Why?"

"We never got close enough to see," she told him. Buck's eyes went wide. "It only happened the day before, and you didn't even see Doug the day before, unless…" She released Doug and pointed at Buck's face. "You followed us to the mansion, didn't you? You stole the paint and did those terrible things to make me think Doug did them." Images of Allison, Rayne, and Chester suddenly floated before her. Buck had a reason to kill every one of them.

And his reason was to prove himself to her.

"What else did you do, Buck? *What else did you do!"*

Buck recoiled like a vampire from a cross. Then, seeing the terror in her eyes, he seemed to read her thoughts. He straightened up, a dark smile on his face. His eyes bored into her.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he purred. "Pray you don't ever find out." With a sneer, Buck spun on his heels and hurried away.

Laura turned to Doug. "Did you hear that? He did it! He killed them. And now he knows I know."

Doug shook his head. "He's bluffing, Laura."

"Did you see his eyes?" she cried. "I can't just let him get away with it!" Then she almost laughed despite her upset. A week ago, she would have been more than happy to let Buck go.

"I'm sure there's nothing he'd like more than for you to falsely accuse him of murder. You'll make a fool out of yourself. It's exactly want he wants."

Doug held her by the shoulders, to keep her from running off. For a moment, she considered elbowing Doug in the stomach to get away. But the look in his eyes stopped her. He was very concerned for her at this moment. And Laura realized she was very close to losing control of herself.

"But what if you're wrong?" Laura asked, still very much afraid.

"You haven't believed a word I've said for days," Doug said with a kind smile. "But trust me on this one, if only because you owe me."

"Okay," she told him, and he hugged her close.

* * *

Doug remained at the hospital with Laura for the rest of the day. Her mother joined the vigil for a while after work, but then left because she was exhausted. So was Laura, but she wouldn't leave until the nurses told her that visiting hours were over and made her go. They insisted Shelby would be all right. Her condition hadn't improved, but she was stable.

At least Buck hadn't shown his face after that last encounter. She didn't share her fears with Doug, but part of the reason she had stayed so long was that she didn't want Shelby to be left alone. Buck knew his way around the hospital, and he was predictably unpredictable. Who knew what was really going on in his head, or what he would do to get back at Laura for rejecting him. Because now she *had* rejected him.

Over the course of the day, she had come to see the difference between Buck and Doug. The contrast was stark. And suddenly the planets *had* aligned. Doug and Laura were at the same place now. By the time they left, Doug knew that, too. And best of all, neither had to say a word. It was simply understood.

* * *

Doug followed Laura home, and when they got there, Laura found a note from her mother. She had gone to bed early, and had taken a couple of sleeping pills to help her. She'd be out for the night.

"That means we can listen to speed metal at high volume, and she still won't wake up," Laura joked. She was caught in a whirlwind of excitement,

relief, fear, and sadness. Sleep seemed like a good idea. But she didn't want Doug to leave just yet.

He agreed to stay and watch a movie with her. Turning off all the lights in the living room, they pretended they were in a movie theater and lost themselves in the movie. When it was over, Laura couldn't remember at what point they had started holding hands.

She was happy.

Then the phone rang.

"Heya, gorgeous," drawled a sardonic voice.

"What do you want, Buck?" Laura answered calmly. Doug heard and came right over. He started to take the receiver away from her, but she wouldn't let him.

"I dunno. I've been off work for a while, relaxing, and was wondering how you were doing." His voice sounded faraway and dreamy.

"You're drunk, aren't you?"

This produced a gale of laughter from Buck. "No! This comes naturally. If anything, I'm cleaner than usual. Yep. Decided not to take the pills my doctor insists I take."

"Pills?"

"Yup!" he chirped. "My shrink gives me these things that kinda keep me on an even keel most of the time." A little sinisterly he repeated, "Most of the time." Then he was bright and cheerful again. "But I'm not in the mood to be on an even keel, you know? Sometimes I like it when the boat's rockin' a bit. A little rock. A little roll. Gotta love it."

"You should get some sleep, Buck." She was trying to sound neutral. But apparently she tried too hard.

"Don't patronize me!" he shouted. Then, just as instantly, he acted as if his outburst had never happened. "I'm not really sleepy. Hard to sleep during the rock and roll, you know. So I thought I'd go visit a friend of mine in the hospital."

Laura tensed. "You stay away from Shelby."

"Tell you what. Let's play a little game." The idea of a game made him giggle. The sound gave Laura chills. "I'll race you to your sister's room. Winner take all. How's that?"

"Buck, don't…"

His voice overrode hers. "I'm on my way. And don't waste time. You know how long it takes to complete even a 911 call. And those hospital

phones just ring *forever.* See ya there, and maybe we'll talk.

"And remember, winner takes all."

He hung up.

"We have to get to the hospital," Laura shouted before Doug could speak. They raced out the door.

*** * ***

What's a game without a cheat? Buck asked himself as he climbed a back stairway at the hospital. He had called from a pay phone just outside. Laura could never reach the hospital in time.

In time for what? Now, *there* was the $64,000 question. That's for me to know and Laura to find out.

Buck chuckled to himself as he exited the stairwell. Shelby's room was just down the hall.

Ah, the things he had done to ensure Laura would be his. The conspiracies. The crimes.

Yes, the crimes.

Buck checked the hallway. It was empty. He continued toward Shelby's room.

He had done so much, but Laura had still rejected him. And she wasn't just playing hard to get any longer. She was playing *never* to get.

He put his hand on the doorknob of Shelby's room. As he looked to the left and right, the hallway appeared to be empty. Buck slipped silently into Shelby's room.

Shelby lay there, in a pained sleep.

Now it was time to wait for Laura to arrive. In the meantime, there was one last thing to do.

Buck smiled grimly and withdrew the straight razor from his pocket.

Chapter 14

Laura and Doug burst through the Emergency Room doors.

"You get security," Laura ordered. "I'll go up to Shelby's room."

"You shouldn't go up there alone," Doug insisted.

"I have to. Maybe it's the only thing that will keep Buck from doing something crazy."

"If he hasn't already." They both knew this was a possibility. But Laura felt she had already wasted too much time to argue.

"Just do it. I'll be okay." With that she ran off. Doug seemed almost frozen in place, torn between following her and calling security. Laura couldn't worry about that. She just had to hope his paralysis would end so he could do his part and get help.

* * *

The elevator couldn't reach the third floor fast enough. Laura pounded on the Open Door button as soon as the three lit up on the panel above her. At the first movement of the doors, she immediately tried to force them open faster. The doors themselves seemed to resist her as if on Buck's orders.

"Come *on*!" she yelled, and squeezed out the opening as soon as there was room. The hallway seemed dimmer than it should be, and Laura realized that someone had turned off most of the overhead lights. It made the going slow, but she finally reached Shelby's room. Inside it was even darker.

"Buck?" she called tentatively from the doorway. There was no answer. She reached for the light switch on the wall. Fluorescent bulbs buzzed to life.

And Laura shrank against the doorframe in horror.

Covering Shelby's bed was a swarm of plastic tubing. The liquid in it now, though, was red. Blood was backing up into them. Shelby's blood. Laura forced herself to move toward the bed. So thick was the tangle of tubing, she could not even see her sister's face.

On the wall behind the bed, in dripping red letters, were the words help wanted.

Tears welled in Laura's eyes. She glanced at the other end of the bed. Something was wrong. It was the size of the feet. Somebody had neglected to remove Shelby's shoes. Pulling the sheet off, Laura discovered black tennis shoes. She recognized them instantly. As quickly as she could, she cleared away some of the tubing obscuring the patient's face.

On his face was etched terror greater than any Laura had ever seen before. Buck lay in the hospital bed. Dead.

The unearthly laughter began then. It didn't come from any particular place in the room, but surrounded her. It was a harsh, cruel rasp, and it threatened to close in and crush Laura. The sound of a dead bolt sliding into place came through the laughter. That sound Laura could pinpoint, and she spun toward the door.

There stood Shelby in her bloody hospital gown. Twin streams of thick, red liquid gushed from her nose. As she pulled her hand away from the lock, Shelby was laughing. Somehow, that sourceless sound was emanating from her. Her eyes were bloodshot, cold, evil. Not Shelby's at all.

"So are you going to apply for any of these jobs, or what?" Shelby's voice croaked. It was like listening to two voices at once: Shelby's doubled by that of some ancient evil thing a millisecond behind. The sound was disorienting.

"What are you talking about?" Laura's voice was quivering with terror.

"What do you think?" answered the double-voiced monster that had been her sister. "You wanted a job so badly. I gave you four wonderful opportunities." The thing started walking toward Laura. "Although I know you weren't keen on working at the hospital, things are a little… heh heh heh… *dead* around here."

It gestured to Buck and laughed again. Laura wanted to retch, scream, and fall to the floor clutching her ears at the same time. Somehow, she remained on her feet, and backed toward the curtain that divided the room in half. Earlier today, that far half of the room had been empty, save for some equipment.

"Let me introduce myself," said the duel voices. "I'm Freddy Krueger."

"That's impossible," Laura cried in disbelief. "He's been dead for years."

One sinister eyebrow went up and the thing laughed again. When it stopped, the voice was deadly serious.

"Don't bet on it."

Instantly Laura knew the voice was telling the truth. Before her stood Shelby, possessed by Freddy Krueger. Laura became certain of one other thing: Her life was nearly over. Despite that realization, or perhaps emboldened by it, Laura stopped backing away.

"You leave my sister alone!" she yelled.

The thing just laughed in its eerie, echoing way. "You mean fire her? Why, she's been my invaluable employee." It gestured toward Buck's inert form. "Her latest masterwork. Of course, he had meant to kill himself over you, anyway. He was about to slash his wrists so you'd find him beside your sister." Another chilling laugh. "We changed his job description."

Laura had begun to back up again. She bumped up against a water cooler, nearly upsetting it.

"How about coming to work for me? You set 'em up, and me and your sister will, as they say, knock 'em dead!"

"I'd never be responsible for someone else's death!" Laura yelled defiantly.

"You already have been," the thing replied. "Of course, it *has* been on a freelance basis. You didn't even know what you were doing, with all the applications you filled out. Death certificates, that's what they really were."

"No!" She couldn't believe she was somehow responsible for the tragedy that had befallen Buck and the others. She *refused* to believe it.

"Yes, you wanted a job. No matter what. I saw it in your dreams. I'm good at seeing things like that," he chuckled. "Now I'll put you on the payroll. The pay is good — you and your sister will live. And that pretty much covers the benefits, as well."

"Never!" Laura glanced at the door. Where was Doug and the cavalry?

Freddy directed Shelby to move forward. "Let me tell you this," he hissed. "If you refuse, your sister will die of a brain hemorrhage tonight." It licked its lips. "Of course, I have to decide whether to let you live to see that happen."

"Let me tell *you* something," Laura found herself saying. A look of surprise temporarily interrupted the menace set in Shelby's face. "You're giving me my sister back. And you're going back to where you came from. And this time, *flush it*!"

The thing froze. It studied Laura, as if judging her a real threat. Then its eyes went wide and it burst into fresh, evil laughter.

"You had me going there for a second, little girl," it gasped. Then all humor drained instantly away. "Turn down the position at your own peril. Most people would *die* for a job like this. Many have."

Then it moved forward. Clearly the end was here. It would kill her. That didn't bother Laura nearly as much as she thought. How could she fight some otherworldly bully like Freddy Krueger? She had heard the rumors, but never believed them. Despite all the mysterious, violent deaths in Springwood, she had always believed they were performed by copycats or devotees. How could she have conceived that the real Freddy Krueger kept returning?

"That's right," Freddy told her soothingly. "Give yourself to me. I can always make you a lifeguard for my temp pool!"

Just like that, rage flooded into Laura. Freddy's comment reminded her of the beginning of this deadly chapter in her life. All she had wanted to do was have a job, her family, a boyfriend, and her friends. Then Chester had fired her. Shelby had been forced to lie to her. And Buck had come into her life and tried to hijack it for his own selfish needs.

Now here was some demon attempting to do the same thing.

No way.

"If you plan on killing Shelby," she growled, "I guess I have nothing to lose." With that, she grabbed the nearest metal object — a bedpan — and hurled it at Shelby's head. It struck with a loud clang.

Freddy just laughed, safe inside Shelby's body.

"This is going to hurt her a lot more than it will hurt me!" he declared. And kept walked inexorably forward.

Laura was aware that she didn't have the slightest idea of what to do next. Despite her resolve to defeat Freddy, she couldn't see herself stabbing at her sister with a scalpel, even if she came across one.

A cluster of machinery huddled in a far corner of the room. Running to it, she pulled out a heavy EKG machine. It was on rollers and moved easily. Still, it should pack some punch, she figured, and pushed it with all her might at Shelby.

With a snicker, and superhuman strength, Freddy batted the EKG machine away as if it were a plastic toy.

Laura pushed out another machine, one she did not recognize. Again it did little but halt Freddy's progress for a moment. This gave Laura time to scan the room. Her eyes finally landed on something that might help. On a counter behind her rested a small machine with handles like air hockey paddles. It was the defibrillator, like she had seen on the myriad of television hospital dramas, used to resuscitate heart attack victims.

A flicker of apprehension darted across Shelby's face when Freddy saw what Laura had spied. Laura knew she was on the right track. She pushed one last piece of equipment at her sister and ran for the defibrillator.

"You can't win, you know that," Freddy taunted. "You still have a chance to save yourself and your sister. Just think of the power you could wield through me!"

Laura flipped the switch on the defibrillator. A high-pitched whine indicated it was charging. She held up the paddles and faced her enemy.

"This is the only power I need!" Laura didn't know if that was true, but she advanced on Shelby anyway.

Shelby attacked with outstretched arms. Laura dodged them. Freddy was moving clumsily, it now seemed. Was Shelby in there, trying to fight Freddy? Laura couldn't think about that. She only acted, bringing the paddles down on Shelby's chest. For kicks, she yelled, "Clear!"

The paddles never touched Shelby, but a jolt sent her flying backward. At the same time, a shape materialized briefly around Shelby's form. Laura saw it for a flashing moment: a burned, gnarled creature, with eyes of pure evil. A tattered green and red sweater covered livid flesh. Then he blinked off as if someone had pulled the plug on a gruesome Christmas tree.

"Thought you'd get a charge out of that," Laura said after she recovered from the amazing glimpse of Freddy. It was the same scarred creature who had appeared as Warner Holbert in her nightmare.

Shelby staggered forward again, almost shambling. But the hate in her eyes had not diminished even slightly. This time, Laura didn't wait to be attacked. She rushed forward, and with a feint, planted the paddles on Shelby's chest once more.

Again Freddy burst into view around Shelby. Anger and frustration were clear in his expression. The vision disappeared as Shelby's body flew backward into the water cooler. This time it did topple and landed on the ground next to Shelby. The bottle bounced once, breaking free of the

dispenser, and water poured from it. Shelby was slow-moving, splashing in the spreading puddle as if drowning in a deep pool.

Laura moved forward once more, but the wires securing the paddles to the machine had reached their limit. Freddy would have to come after her if she was to attack again. But he would be prepared now. And would stay out of range until he could strike.

Just then, the pounding started on the door.

"Laura? Are you in there? Laura!" It was Doug. Down the hall, other shouting voices approached. Soon the hospital personnel would unlock the door and flood in. More people would be in danger. She had to end this. Now.

And she knew how.

Freddy had gained control of Shelby's body and was beginning to stand. He glanced toward the door and licked his lips once more. Then he returned his gaze to Laura, smugly confident that she was unable to attack with the defibrillator machine.

He was wrong.

Dropping to the floor, Laura plunged the paddles into the puddle of water, the edge of which began just before her. There was a tremendous jolt, one that was sustained as electricity poured out of the machine and into the water. And coursed through Shelby's body.

Freddy appeared again, this time his form flickering on and off with the ebb and flow of electricity. Each time, his image stayed in view longer, until Laura could no longer see Shelby through him. He fell to the floor, shrieking in agony. Laura pressed her hands to her ears to close out the sound.

In the water, Freddy writhed and splashed. The lights of the room began to dim as power was diverted and circuits began to overload. Doug shouted from the other side of the door, his shouts becoming more frantic. A key finally entered the lock, but panic prevented it from being turned easily. The room became a strobing terror disco, flashing light and dark, Freddy on the floor, then Shelby.

Then the room went completely black.

Apparently, power went out all over. The struggling with the lock stopped momentarily. Laura could sense no movement within the room. She held her breath, waiting to see what would happen next.

She looked up toward the sound of the key being slid smoothly into the lock and turned swiftly. Just as the door opened, the emergency generators kicked in and an eerie twilight filled the room. Several doctors, nurses, and security officers froze in the doorway as they beheld the chaos.

Doug pushed passed them, paused briefly at the sight of Shelby, and ran toward Laura.

"My God," he cried. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," she answered, looking past him. "Shelby!"

He turned. The crowd had pushed its way into the room. A doctor and some nurses were crouched over Shelby, while security and another doctor viewed Buck's ghastly remains. Laura and Doug went over to Shelby.

"Is she… dead?" she asked, swallowing hard.

A doctor looked up, in shock. He gave her a piercing look, trying to place this room in some sort of recognizable universe in his mind. Obviously he was failing.

"No, she seems to be alive," he finally said. He continued to scrutinize her. "What the hell…"

Laura ignored him. "Find out if she's all right for real. I have to talk to the police."

"Yes," was all he could say in reply. Then he nodded to the nurses. They sprang into action, one bringing over a gurney on which to place Shelby. They were anxious to avoid dealing with Buck's body.

At the security guard's request, Laura allowed herself to be escorted to a waiting area until the police arrived. They allowed Doug to remain with her throughout her questioning by a stone-faced detective named Farthing. He asked her to relate her version of the evening's events and listened without interrupting. Betraying no emotion, no clue as to whether he believed her or not, he asked for clarification on a few items.

You believe the killer to be Freddy Krueger?

Your sister was «possessed» by Krueger?

Buck had come to kill himself in your sister's room, despondent over you?

Laura answered each question with an affirmative. Detective Farthing nodded to himself and hummed, still poker-faced. He flipped his notes back to the beginning and made a mark next to an item.

"You said that on the phone, Buck claimed to be taking some sort of prescription mood leveler?"

"Yes." Laura braced herself, waiting for Detective Farthing to declare her insane, or lying, and haul her away.

Detective Farthing only replied by nodding once more. Then he stood, walked toward the back of the little room as if working out something in his head, then turned back to Laura.

"The way I see it," he mused aloud, "your friend Buck wasn't quite playing with a full deck." He nodded again, as if making sure that this made sense and deciding it did. "We'll probably find some violent behavior in his past, and you said he didn't *always* take his medication."

"That's what he told me," Laura reiterated. Farthing was beginning to spook her a bit.

"Yes," he said, nodding as if to some internal counsel. "So it appears to me that Buck stopped taking his medication, became more and more unstable, took the lives of your schoolmates, then his own life. It's very simple." He was now staring intensely at Laura.

"But it wasn't Buck," Laura reminded him. "It was Freddy, working through my sister."

Detective Farthing leaned forward on the table with his stone-face inches away from Laura's. "It's very simple," he repeated calmly. "Buck did it. He's dead. No investigation. No fireworks. No one else gets hurt. Got that?" A trace of menace had crept into his voice.

"Don't you believe me?" Laura asked, trying to get past his defenses.

"Let's just say I like my story better," he said, standing to full height. "It's cleaner, don't you think? And better for everyone involved, especially you and your sister."

Now Laura saw what he was doing. Detective Farthing did believe her, but he knew no one else would. He was constructing an easier-to-swallow version of events, to protect both her and, likely, a beleaguered police department that had an astronomically high number of homicides per capita. It was a cover-up, but one that she and Shelby would supposedly benefit from.

"I see," Laura said solemnly, and stood.

Detective Farthing turned to Doug, who had remained silent through the whole interview. "What about you, sport?"

"Cleanliness is next to godliness, they say." He, too, stood. "I vote for your story."

Farthing raised an eyebrow. Laura took that as an expression of relief. He let them go, and neither she nor Doug was ever questioned again on the subject. The two officially became an item, after Laura found herself saying these words to him:

"I'm yours, if you want me. I'd do anything for you."

* * *

As for Shelby, she awoke the next day fully alert, and was out of the hospital two days after that. The doctors proclaimed her recovery a miracle. No sign of trauma from the car accident remained.

One thing that did remain was her memory of how horrible she had been to Laura.

"I'd like to say the devil made me do it or something," she told Laura seriously. "But he only really controlled me when he wanted to kill someone. The lying, the sneaking around, that was all me."

Laura instantly forgave her anyway. But she had a question.

"Is Freddy still… with you?" She couldn't shake the feeling that he was still lurking somewhere, waiting to spring out.

"No. Freddy's gone. I know that for sure." Shelby's conviction was unshakable. "I think once you reject him, he's not able to return. I can't say how I know that, it's just something I feel."

Laura took her sister's word for it, but worry still must have shown on her face.

"Heck!" Shelby told her cheerily. "Maybe you got rid of him once and for all."

Laura smiled, but shook her head. She remembered Freddy's words on the subject:

"Don't bet on it."

Epilogue

I guess it's time to take down the Help Wanted sign, eh? With four new recruits for the boiler room brigade, I've got almost all the help I could want!

Dear Allison — she has been hired to try on all the new boiler room fashions. Talk about hot *clothing. But unfortunately, the only fabric we use down here is asbestos, so they're not exactly the most flattering of fashions. No doubt she'll experience job burnout very soon.*

It would break my heart — if I had one. Heh heh heh…

Chester could use what she's got, however. He is working as a beach model. Unfortunately, he's become the ninety-pound weakling who gets sand kicked into his face. And who's doing the kicking? Why, it's his old friend Buck! The bad news for Buck — and worse news for Chester — is that we just can't keep sand in a place like the boiler room. It just turns to glass! So we've replaced all the sand with lava. How'd you like a face full of that? Chester sure doesn't like it, but he wanted a job where all he does is remain in one place and do nothing. Well, that's what he does when Buck kicks lava in his face: nothing. And he does it well!

Don't think Buck's got it so good. Not only does he have a hotfoot to deal with, but remember Rayne? Now, there was a tacky girl! Since her accident with the deep fryer, she's become even tackier. In fact, she and Buck are joined at the hip — literally. Her flesh has melted to his, and she escorts him everywhere. And lucky Buck gets an up-close-and-personal view of her boil-covered, charred flesh.

Sounds like my kind of girl! Heh heh heh…

They may complain about their work, but they're lucky really. Who else has job security like them? Since each one is consigned to the boiler room for eternity, they can never be fired!

On the other hand, since they are in a boiler room, they will be «fired» repeatedly throughout their never-ending careers.

Too bad I haven't installed a water cooler yet.

Heh heh heh…